Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Prologue
3. Chapter 1
4. Chapter 2
5. Chapter 3
6. Chapter 4
7. Chapter 5
8. Chapter 6
9. Chapter 7
10. Chapter 8
11. Chapter 9
12. Chapter 10
13. Chapter 11
14. Chapter 12
15. Chapter 13
16. Chapter 14
17. Chapter 15
18. Chapter 16
19. Chapter 17
20. Chapter 18
21. Chapter 19
22. Chapter 20
23. Chapter 21
24. Chapter 22
25. Chapter 23
26. Chapter 24
27. Chapter 25
28. Chapter 26
29. Chapter 27
30. Chapter 28
31. Chapter 29
32. Chapter 30
33. Epilogue
34. Author's Note

Allegiances

Be sure to check out the sequel, "Flamepaw's Destination" when you've finished the work :)

~COPYRIGHT STATEMENT REGARDING MY WARRIORS FICS~
I am putting this here simply because it has become quite an issue lately. Please DO NOT use my original characters/clans/concepts in any of your Warriors fics. (This does not include warriors cats with the same names. I understand coincidences if we happened to pick the same names for our characters.) I work hard on my novels, and it is upsetting to witness a circumstance where the author feels they need to "borrow" ideas/characters from me because they're not creative enough. Simply stated, the Warriors world is big and complex enough for an author to be able to create his or her own characters/clans/plot. Thank you for your understanding.

~STATEMENT REGARDING GRAMMATICAL ERRORS AND COMMENTS~

Please REFRAIN from continually correcting typos and grammatical errors. I am a grammar nazi myself, and I understand some of you are too, but I have several published works and do not have time to correct EVERY error. Unless the error severely limits your understanding of the story, I will not be taking immediate action to fix these typos. Please REFRAIN from telling me "cats can't cry" and "cats can't blush" etc. These novels are a work of FICTION. I know cats can't cry and perform human-like characteristics; however, this is a work of fiction and is written in a way to convey emotion. I am sick and tired of getting comments like these because they detract from my work and make it seem like you care more about correcting typos/ (sorry) being a pompous know-it-all than reading and enjoying a work. Don't be surprised if I get sassy/sarcastic with you in the comments. I ask you refrain from making such comments on my work.

RIVERCLAN (Only Cats Mentioned in the Series):

LEADER--Goldstar: golden tabby she-cat

DEPUTY--Mountainheart: black and white tom with green eyes

MEDICINE CAT--Mountaineye: black and white tom with green eyes
~APPRENTICE: None

WARRIORS:

Whitepettle: white she-cat with green eyes

Dusktail: black tom with yellow eyes
Mate: Thornheart

Stealthfoot: gray tabby tom with green eyes
Mate: Shadowfur

Snowheart: white she-cat with one blue and one green eye

Fireclaw: ginger tom
Mate: Longriver

Cherrypool: tortoiseshell she-cat

Daisyflower: tortoiseshell she-cat

Brownpelt: brown tabby tom with green eyes
Mate: Suntail

Shadowfur: black she-cat with green eyes
Mate: Stealthfoot

APPRENTICES:

Rockpaw: gray tabby tom with white belly and amber eyes

Rosepaw: white she-cat with green eyes

Bramblepaw: brown tabby tom with green eyes

QUEENS:

Suntail: golden tabby she-cat
Mate: Brownpelt
Kits: Flamekit

Longirver: gray she-cat with green eyes
Mate: Fireclaw
Kits: Mudkit, Oakkit

Thornheart: brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes
Mate: Dusktail
Kits: Mothkit

KITS:

Mothkit: calico she-cat with green eyes

Mudkit: brown tabby tom with green eyes

Oakkit: dark brown tabby tom with green eyes

Flamekit: ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes

ELDERS:

No-Claw: gray tom with yellow eyes and no noticeable claws

CATS OUTSIDE THE CLAN:

Neko: white tom with black spots

Patches: tortoiseshell she-cat

Smoky: gray tabby tom with white belly

Korosu: Javanese she-cat

Tornface: large black and white tom

Zebrafur: striped she-cat

Clawkit: small brown tabby tom

Leopardkit: spotted she-cat

Speckledkit: tortoiseshell she-cat

Crowkit: black tabby with white stripes

Lightkit: gray tabby she-cat

Runningkit: light gray tabby tom

Tigerkit: brown tabby tom

Barkpaw: brown tabby tom with green eyes

Prologue

StarClan remained in a blissful state, peace flooding through it like a wildfire. All around, green leaves sparkled with wet dew, rivers flowed quietly, and grass gently swayed in the cool wind.

Three cats stood perched at the top of a hill, glancing down below at the large flowing river. It had been moons since their arrivals to StarClan, though it wasn't as if they minded being here instead of their clan.

The first cat standing on the grassy hill was a white she-cat, one that had been living in StarClan for many moons since her death. The second was one of her most faithful companions, a larger ginger tabby tom, who had only recently arrived in StarClan.

And the last cat standing near them was a young light brown tabby kitten, who had been in StarClan too many moons to count.

Slowly, they began their descent down the hill, a gust of wind blowing against them.

"It's freezing," the white she-cat grumbled.

"Now, now, Mossystar. It's not like you could control the weather," the tom warned.

"I'd at least have liked some better notice beforehand, Salmonstar," she growled.

"Keep your heads straight, both of you! We're here to discuss RiverClan business!" the young kit squeaked in fury.

The three fell silent, continuing their walk to the river.

Suddenly, the young kit's face turned into a smile. "I can hear the river!"

"Yes. We're nearly there," the tom muttered, leading the group farther down towards the river. The wind settled down, and the river came into view.

"It reminds me of the river back home," Mossystar purred at the sight of it.

The small kit bounded after them, grinning. Now, they could hear the rushing of the river, and they sat down next to it on the warm grass.

"Thank goodness. Some warmth!" Mossystar exclaimed, laying down.

It was customary to discuss RiverClan business near the river in StarClan. All three cats had died in their clan of RiverClan, and now, they strayed near the river that flowed through StarClan, the landmark a constant reminder of their past life.

"If not obvious already, we're here to discuss the prophecy," Salmonstar spoke, beginning their meeting.

"Of course. RiverClan only deserves the best," Mossystar replied.

"Indeed. Goldstar has done well with the clan. I was right to make her my deputy," Salmonstar began.

"We're not here to talk about Goldstar!" the young kit hissed, her eyes gazing on the two old leaders of RiverClan. "We're here to talk about the prophecy, which just so happens to be vitally important to RiverClan!"

"Of course, of course," Mossystar nodded, breaking away from all other thoughts. "Well, what do you think it means, then?"

"The prophecy clearly mentions Goldstar and RiverClan, but I just can't seem to figure out the last parts," the small tabby mewed, sighing.

Salmonstar pondered for a moment, then stared at the kit. "Perhaps it's about a chosen cat," he offered.

Both the kit and Mossystar nodded in agreement, coming to the conclusion that it had to be that.

"But how can we knnow which cat it is?" Salmonstar asked.

"We'll figure it out," Mossystar reassured him. "Perhaps this cat has not even been born yet."

"Mossystar proves a right point," the kit explained. "Obviously someone will help this cat, but I just don't get the last part!"

"Could you repeat the prophecy again?" Salmonstar asked.

The kit opened her mouth to speak when suddenly a gust of wind blew forward, and the river turned a bright shade of gold. Before any of them could ask why, orange flames burst from the water, rising high, heat blazing from it. Then, the flames quickly dived down, the gold color vanished, and another gust of wind blew the river back to its original state.

"*Flames will save the golden river, with the help of five cats, and the quest will begin,"* the kitten gasped.

The prophecy rang through all of their eyes, and so did the cry of a newborn kitten in RiverClan.

Chapter 1

Flamekit's eyes lazily opened in the early morning. Her back was pressed against the warmth of her mother, Suntail's, pelt. Flamekit turned, finding her mother still asleep. Frowning, she yawned, glancing around the nursery.

There were only three other kits beside herself in the nursery, leaving her with very few playmates.

She glanced over at Mothkit, a calico kitten who had recently turned five moons old. Flamekit was aware she'd be an apprentice soon, though Mothkit had been explaining how she'd been wanting to be a medicine cat apprentice for the past moon.

Overall, Mothkit had been her only friend in the nursery so far, and she'd be leaving three moons before Flamekit was able to become an apprentice.

Flamekit turned her head, glancing at Mothkit's mother, Thornheart who slept beside her.

Across from Thornheart were two toms, Mudkit and Oakkit. Their mother, Longriver, was gone, probably eating a quick mouse before the two woke. Mudkit and Oakkit were two moons, only one moon older than her, which meant she'd be stuck with them for much too long in the nursery.

Suntail stirred, causing Flamekit to jump.

"Are you already awake?" Suntail asked.

Flamekit nodded, turning to face her mother. Suntail looked very similar to her, her pelt a golden, almost orange color. Flamekit's pelt, however, blazed much brighter than Suntail's.

"How about we go on a walk?" Suntail suggested, knowing the nursery did not do too much for Flamekit.

"Sure," Flamekit agreed, rising and following her mother outside of the den. It was another normal day in RiverClan as cats ate, rushed to patrols, and chatted with each other.

"Will we go see Brownpelt?" Flamekit asked.

Brownpelt was her father, a large and strong tom who was a good warrior for RiverClan. His pelt, unlike Flamekit's, was a dark brown with tabby markings. At times, Flamekit wondered if he even was her father with such a distinct pelt, but then she remembered

she possessed the same bright green eyes as him.

"I'm afraid not. He was assigned on patrol," Suntail replied.

Like always, Flamekit thought, frowning.

She padded next to Suntail, passing by Rosepaw and Bramblepaw, two fairly new RiverClan apprentices. The two siblings were wrestling around with each other, laughing. They'd only been in the nursery a week or so before becoming apprentices. Flamekit had only known them for a short time.

"Hey, Flamekit! Hi, Suntail!" Rosepaw called, lifting her white tail. Bramblepaw waved his next to hers.

Suntail continued padding around camp, passing by the apprentice den. Rockpaw sat against it, his gray pelt shining in the sunlight.

"Good morning, Rockpaw," Suntail called.

"Oh, hello, Suntail," Rockpaw replied. "Hi, Flamekit." Rockpaw was larger than Rosepaw and Bramblepaw, considering the fact he was nearly twelve moons. Flamekit knew Goldstar would be making him a warrior in a short amount of time.

"How are you, Suntail?" Rockpaw asked.

"I'm fine. Is everything going well with your training?" Suntail asked.

"Oh, yes! In fact, Goldstar's making me a warrior today."

"Congratulations!" Suntail exclaimed.

"Hey, is that nursery crowded, Flamekit?" Rockpaw asked.

Flamekit shrunk down, frightened by the tom's large size. She knew it was stupid, being afraid of a fellow RiverClan member, but she couldn't help it.

"Um, not really," she murmured.

"Mothkit will become an apprentice soon, and if no other queens move in soon, it'll just be Flamekit, Mudkit, and Oakkit," Suntail explained.

"Well, thanks for chatting. I'll see you later for the ceremony," Rockpaw called, padding off to meet up with some warriors.

"You're welcome!" Flamekit called as he padded away.

Flamekit looked up, noticing cats piling into camp. Morning patrol had returned, and Goldstar led the way, looking furious.

Suntail immediately ran to her, Flamekit struggling to follow behind.

"Goldstar, what's wrong?" Suntail asked. Suntail was

Goldstar's sister, technically making Goldstar Flamekit's aunt. The two had continued to share a loving sister relationship after Goldstar had become leader, and though Goldstar often tried to hide her troubles, Suntail was always able to detect them.

"There were ShadowClan cats trespassing today," she growled. "They think RiverClan's weak because we have three apprentices. It's not my fault leaf-bare was so cruel."

"But you'll have more apprentices soon," Suntail assured her.

"I know that!" Goldstar hissed.

Suntail shrunk down, and Flamekit hid behind her.

"Sorry," Goldstar sighed. "I'm just frustrated."

"Well, good luck," Suntail offered, turning to face Brownpelt.

"Good morning, Suntail," Brownpelt purred as the crowd broke up and cats went off to do their daily duties. "How are you doing?"

"Just fine."

Brownpelt then turned his attention to Flamekit.

"And how's my favorite kit?" he asked.

"I'm your only kit," Flamepaw replied, giggling.

"Sorry about Goldstar," Brownpelt mewed quietly. "She's tense, that's all. She's only been leader for three moons."

"I know," Suntail sighed.

"Well, I'll catch up with you later," he called, padding away.

"Let's head back to the nursery, then," Suntail suggested, turning around. Flamekit followed behind her, disappointed their walk had been rather short.

Once they returned, Flamekit immediately raced over to Mothkit, who was now awake.

"Good morning, Flamekit!" Mothkit exclaimed.

"Morning!"

"Excited to see your first warrior ceremony today?" Mothkit asked.

Flamekit nodded vigorously. "When will you be an apprentice?"

"Not for another moon," Mothkit explained. "But we still have a moon together. And besides, once I'm an apprentice, you'll be able to visit me all the time. Just make sure to get a thorn in your paw or something."

Flamekit laughed, though she was saddened by the fact Mothkit would be leaving the nursery in only a moon.

They continued chatting and playing for a good remainder of time. It was only when Flamekit heard Suntail's call that she pricked her ears.

"Rockpaw's warrior ceremony is starting!" Suntail called.

Flamekit and Mothkit both exchanged glances and smiled, racing out of the den together. Mothkit led her to the front of the crowd, finding two spots for them to sit. Flamekit sat down beside her friend, turning her head to see yet another calico warrior.

"Hi, there, Flamekit," the calico she-cat purred.

"Hey, Daisyflower!" Mothkit called.

"Hi," Flamekit replied quietly. She then turned to Mothkit. "How does she know my name?"

Mothkit giggled. "You're the newest kit born here, and technically, a descendent of Goldstar. Everyone knows your name."

"Quiet!" Daisyflower urged, shushing them. "The ceremony is starting."

Flamekit glanced up, watching Rockpaw stand at the top of a large log with Goldstar. Goldstar paused, waiting for the crowd to quiet down.

"Welcome, RiverClan. I call upon my warrior ancestors to look upon this apprentice. He has trained hard to follow your noble code, and I grant him to you as a warrior in return. Snowheart," Goldstar called.

Flamekit turned, noticing a large white she-cat standing near the rock.

"You have mentored Rockpaw for the past six moons. Do you believe he is ready to become a noble warrior of RiverClan?"

"I do, Goldstar," Snowheart agreed.

"Then, by the power of StarClan, I give you your warrior name of Rockpelt!"

"ROCKPELT! ROCKPELT!" the clan cried.

Flamekit shouted next to Mothkit, chanting, "Rockpelt! Rockpelt!"

Flamekit glanced up, looking at Rockpelt's smiling face. Flamekit hoped one day too to stand on the log and receive her warrior name from Goldstar after a long and hard amount of training. It would be an honor to become a RiverClan warrior.

"That was exciting!" Mothkit cheered as the crowd broke

apart.

Flamekit nodded, though she knew the next ceremony she'd attend would most likely be Mothkit's.

"Do you think I'll be a warrior one day?" Flamekit asked.

"Of course you will be," Mothkit said. "The other clans around here are tough, so RiverClan needs all the warriors it can get. Have you started swimming yet?"

"I've had a few lessons," Flamepaw explained. "Suntail's a good teacher, but I suppose I'll really improve once I become an apprentice."

"Well, that's moons away. Still, I'd focus more on being an apprentice than a warrior. You should be excited that you'll be training soon."

"Well, so should you. I'm sure helping sick cats and tending wounds will be fun," Flamekit told her, though she doubted this was any fun.

"Oh, it is! Mountaineye has been letting me stop by to help him. I can't wait to become his apprentice!"

"Flamekit!" Suntail called.

"I'll talk to you later, Mothkit!" Flamekit shouted, running off.

Mothkit grinned and waved as Flamekit padded off with her mother back towards the nursery.

Chapter 2

The moon came and went all too quickly. Apprentices trained, warriors hunted, cats bonded, and the cycle repeated. Flamekit spent her time in the nursery with Mothkit for the whole moon, laughing and playing with her as snow faded from the ground and leaf-bare came to an end.

But now, the air had gotten warmer, the snow had melted, and new-leaf had begun. Mothkit would be turning six moons old today, and Flamekit was depressed, not wanting to lose her only friend in the nursery.

"Flamekit, get up," came her mother's soothing voice.

Flamekit lazily opened her eyes and glanced ahead, noticing Mothkit complaining as her mother, Thornheart, licked her pelt clean.

"Mom, it looks fine!" Mothkit whined, smoothing down her calico pelt.

Flamekit slowly got up, saddened by Mothkit's excitement. It was a shame they wouldn't even train together since Mothkit had decided to take on the role of medicine cat apprentice.

"Oh, Flamekit, you're awake!" Mothkit called, padding towards her.

Flamekit turned away, hoping she didn't see any tears slowly fall down her cheek.

"Hey, you okay?" Mothkit asked, poking Flamekit.

"Why did you want to be a medicine cat?" Flamekit asked quietly.

"What?" Mothkit wondered.

"Why did you want to be a medicine cat?" Flamekit repeated, turning to face her. Flamekit's eyes were red and watery with salty tears.

"I-I've always wanted to be a medicine cat, I guess," Mothkit admitted. "Before you were born, a few moons ago in leaf-bare, herbs were scarce, and they were sending out cats to look for herbs. Thornheart let me go out and look surprisingly since I was tired of being shoved up in the nursery. It was, well, heartwarming, I guess, when we found the herbs to know that we were helping sick cats in

need. I kept stopping by Mountaineye's den after awhile, and that was how I decided."

"I wish you were becoming a warrior," Flamekit sniffed.

"Hey, don't cry," Mothkit whispered. "Turn that frown upside down, Flamekit. You'll train, I'll train, and you'll be able to visit me all the time. Of course, it's still four moons until you're an apprentice. That's not so long."

Flamekit groaned, knowing that would seem like an eternity to her.

"You stay here in the nursery, be a kit, and then you'll be an apprentice learning to fight. And if you scratch one of those pads on your paws, you can come straight to me," Mothkit assured her.

"Thanks," Flamekit replied, grinning.

"ALL CATS OLD ENOUGH TO CATCH THEIR OWN PREY, JOIN BENEATH THE FALLEN TREE FOR A CLAN MEETING!" Goldstar yowled.

"That's my cue! See you out there!" Mothkit exclaimed, skipping out of the den.

"Come on. Let's move," Suntail urged, pushing Flamekit forward. Flamekit followed her mother outside, watching as cats quickly came together as a crowd to watch the young kit become the next future medicine cat.

"Brownpelt!" Suntail called.

At her father's name, Flamekit looked up, spotting the brown tabby sitting to the left of the large log that Goldstar sat perched on.

"Hey, I saved you a seat!" Brownpelt called, waving his tail.

Flamekit rushed towards her father, grinning as she sat down in between him and Suntail.

"Daddy, are you stopping by the nursery later?"

"Goldstar's got me booked for patrols all today," Brownpelt sighed.

Flamekit watched as Suntail eyed her mate.

"But I'll be sure to visit tomorrow," he promised, as he usually did. Unfortunately, these promises were rarely kept.

Flamekit's heart sunk at the news of her father's cancellation of the visit, and it sunk even more as she watched Mothkit pad up the log. When she descended, she'd no longer be a kit.

"What's wrong?" Brownpelt asked, noticing Flamekit's sadness.

"She's upset Mothkit is leaving the nursery and becoming a medicine cat," Suntail answered for her.

"Hey, you'll still be friends though, right? I see Mountaineye all the time!" Brownpelt exclaimed.

"Brownpelt, quit your yapping!" snapped Snowheart, the white she-cat that had formerly been Rockpelt's mentor.

"Mothkit has reached six moons and has decided to become a medicine cat instead of take on normal apprentice training," Goldstar began, gazing down at the cats. "Mothkit, from this day forward, until you become a full medicine cat, you shall be known as Mothpaw. Mountaineye," Goldstar called.

The black and white tom padded forward, grinning warmly at Mothpaw and Goldstar.

"Yes, Goldstar?" he asked.

"You have proved to be a great medicine cat and addition to RiverClan. Please teach Mothpaw all she knows."

"I will not fail," Mountaineye promised, dipping his head. Flamekit watched as Mothpaw raced down the log and touched noses with the tom.

"MOTHPAW! MOTHPAW!" the clan cried.

"Yay! Mothpaw!" Flamekit squeaked, proud of her friend. Her disappointment had shrunk as she watched how happy Mothpaw was standing with Mountaineye in front of the clan. She knew she would surely be a wise and noble medicine cat.

As the clan began to depart, Flamekit raced over to Mothpaw who sat near the log, chatting and grinning at cats as they walked by.

"Congrats!" Flamekit mewed.

"Thanks, Flamekit," Mothpaw purred. "I'm helping Mountaineye do inventory today. He says it'll be good practice for me as I learn the names of all the herbs."

"Sounds fun," Flamekit responded, though it did not appeal at all to her.

"It sure is! Maybe you can visit me tomorrow? I'm sure Mountaineye will give me breaks," Mothpaw suggested.

"Sure!" Flamekit agreed, bouncing up and down. She sure was glad her friend wouldn't be abandoning her to focus solely on training.

"Mothpaw!" came Mountaineye's call.

"I have to go. I'll chat with you later though," Mothpaw

assured her, padding away.

Flamekit smiled, then headed back towards her mother, disappointed she'd enter the nursery and find it emptier than it normally had been.

Throughout the rest of the day, Flamekit remained quite bored as she tossed a mossball back at the wall and watched as it bounced off and returned to her. Mudkit and Oakkit seemed to be occupied with their game, leaving Flamekit to remain bored as ever.

As the sun soon began to set, Flamekit found her eyes getting droopy, and slowly, she curled up next to her mother and fell asleep to the soothing feeling of her mother's tongue on her back.

Flamekit expected a long and lovely dream, but instead, she found herself dreaming she was in a forest (the RiverClan forest, she assumed). Flamekit glanced around, confused. She'd never had such an odd dream like this before.

Hearing shouts behind her, Flamekit turned to see Goldstar, Snowheart, Daisyflower, Rosepaw, Mothpaw, and a spotted tom running quickly. Why they were running, she wasn't sure? She tilted her head, noticing how much larger Rosepaw and Mothpaw seemed.

Before she could focus on the cats even more, she saw a flash of bright orange and gasped, watching a fox leap out of the bushes and begin to run in the cats' direction.

Flamekit froze, then watched as the fox turned its gaze and looked at her. Squealing in fright, Flamekit began to run, the fox chasing after her and snarling.

"Please, no!" Flamekit screeched as she rushed through the woods. The fox snapped its jaws behind her, nearly missing her tail. Tears poured out of Flamekit's eyes now as she ran faster and faster. Her legs were getting tired through, and she knew she could not keep the pace up.

Suddenly, a kit appeared to be running beside her. In a flash, it was gone, and Flamekit could feel the fox gaining on her.

Suddenly, she felt a burst of pain as it snapped on her tail. She screeched in pain and fell to the ground, wondering where the kit had gone and how soon she would die. But the fox had gone, the pain had faded, and she awoke with a jolt to find her heart racing. What had the dream meant? Never in her life had she encountered a fox or had been frightened by one. Who was the kit? Why had

those cats appeared in her dreams?

"Maybe they're in trouble!" Flamekit gasped. The cats in the nursery remained asleep though, and Flamekit silently slipped out of the nursery, curious to know whether or not the cats she had dreamt about truly were in danger.

Slowly, she crept into the forest, a place she had never dared to step before. She took a deep breath, wondering if it truly was a good idea to be going out into the woods at night.

"But the cats," she remembered. What if they died and Flamekit did nothing to stop that fox?

Flamekit took a step forward, her heart beating quickly as she quickly became crowded and lost in a forest of thick trees. An owl hooted behind her, and she jumped, turning around.

"Hello?" she called weakly, wondering if any cat was in the woods.

A flash of color went by, and Flamekit froze. She squinted, making out the faint shape of a tiny kit.

"Hey!" she called, beginning to chase after the kit. "You appeared in my dream!"

The kit did not respond but continued running. Flamekit followed it, running quickly. Suddenly, she lost sight of the kit and realized she was lost in the heart of RiverClan territory.

Flamekit looked around, wondering which way she should go. Should she return home? Should she continue her search? The air was cold and she was frightened. Perhaps this hadn't been a good idea.

A deep growl came from some bushes, and suddenly a fox padded forward angrily.

Without any hesitation, Flamekit squeaked and began to run farther into the woods, the fox chasing after her. Maybe the fox had already killed the other cats and was now looking for more cats to kill.

She screeched as she tripped over a branch and fell over. The fox caught up quickly and snarled at her.

"HELP!" she squealed.

The fox suddenly let out a cry of pain, and Flamekit gasped as another cat leapt on top of the fox and shoved it aside. Yelping, the fox ran off. Flamekit stood up slowly, looking into the concerned eyes of Brownpelt.

"What in StarClan's name were you doing out here?!"

Brownpelt demanded. Never had she seen her father so angry.

"I-I," Flamekit stammered, though she knew if she explained why, she'd be in even more trouble.

"Stop babbling and let's get you to Mountaineye," Brownpelt growled.

Flamekit nodded and took a step forward, letting out a yelp of pain as she put pressure on her left paw.

"Maybe you sprained that paw," Brownpelt observed, picking her up by the scruff. Flamekit remained silent the entire way back to camp, ashamed she'd been so foolish.

As soon as they entered, Suntail rushed up, concerned.

"Where were you, Flamekit?! What happened?" she asked.

"Fox. I'll talk later. Take her to Mountaineye," Brownpelt commanded.

Suntail nodded and grabbed Flamekit. Within a few moments, her father vanished, as he always did.

The medicine cat den was quiet, and Mountaineye seemed surprised to have a visitor so late at night.

"What happened?" Mountaineye asked.

"Brownpelt found her on patrol. He said something about a fox. Flamekit, what happened?"

"I-I went into the woods," Flamekit began, glancing over at the sleeping Mothpaw. "A fox chased me, and I tripped. Brownpelt saved me, but my paw hurts," she whimpered. And suddenly, she began to wail.

"Sh, hush," Suntail whispered.

Mountaineye gazed at her paw and touched it, causing Flamekit to yelp. He observed it for a bit longer, then spoke.

"It should take less than fourteen sunrises to heal."

"That's great news!" Suntail exclaimed.

Flamekit groaned, not wanting to be stuck in the nursery that long. Still, she knew it was her fault she was in this mess. What had the dream meant though?

Chapter 3

Flamekit wasn't sure how it happened, but in a short time, fourteen sunrises came and went, and soon enough, her paw was able to heal.

Those fourteen sunrises had been the longest days of her life though. She had hated being forced to remain in the nursery, confined as if she had a sickness and no cat could visit her or even glance her way.

Suntail had forbidden her from playing with the other cats, demanding that her paw heal well. She knew her mother and father were still angry with her for going off into the woods, but she had felt them calling her, and she had truly believed something had gone wrong.

Of course, Brownpelt and Suntail would not hear of it when Flamekit tried to explain why the decision was made.

Mothpaw had visited Flamekit a few times during those two weeks, though she was often busy with Mountaineye, learning all sorts of medicine cat strategies and herbs.

But now, Flamekit awoke to a new day, finding sunlight. New-leaf had fully taken over the forest, and it was only getting warmer. Flamekit knew by the time she became an apprentice, green-leaf would arrive.

Flamekit stood up and stretched, moving her previously injured paw around. She had to admit, Mountaineye had done a good job of healing it. She almost wished it was still sprained so that she could see Mothpaw more often.

But Flamekit knew she'd be becoming an apprentice in less than three moons. Then, maybe she'd see her friend more. And even better, she'd be learning how to become a warrior.

Flamekit made her way to the entrance of the nursery, only to be stopped by Suntail.

"And where do you think you're going?" her mother asked.

"Outside," Flamekit replied, annoyed with her mother's caution.

"Not to the forest, I hope," her mother growled.

"I wanted to see Mothpaw," Flamekit protested.

"Why not leave her to work?" Suntail suggested. "I know you were good friends with the she-cat, but she's busy becoming a medicine cat apprentice, Flamekit."

Flamekit frowned and sat down in defeat, knowing her mother would most likely not let her visit Mothpaw as often.

"Cheer up," Suntail purred. "Why don't I take you to the riverbed? Maybe you can learn to catch a fish."

"Really?" Flamekit asked, not believing her mother.

"Sure! Of course, I'm not sure how good you'll be at it. Most fish are the size of you," Suntail joked, laughing.

"Is Daddy coming?" Flamekit asked.

"Patrol," Suntail replied. "He's a busy warrior, Flamekit."

"He's not deputy," Flamekit murmured as she followed her mother outside of the den. Cats padded around, chatting with each other on the beautiful day.

"Good morning, Goldstar!" Suntail called to her sister.

Goldstar nodded back, continuing to chat with another warrior.

"Does Goldstar not like you anymore?" Flamekit asked.

Suntail frowned at Flamekit. "What makes you say that?"

"She doesn't talk to you a lot."

"My sister is leader, Flamekit. She doesn't have time to talk as much," Suntail explained. "Come on. Stick by me when we enter the forest."

Flamekit rolled her eyes, finding her mother's precautions to be unnecessary. But she obeyed and stood close to her mother, padding into the somewhat familiar woods.

The last time Flamekit had walked through these woods, she had almost been killed by a fox if it weren't for her father's coming. Since then she'd been lectured about how dangerous the forest was, though here now, in daylight, the most dangerous predator seemed like a butterfly that flew by her nose.

Flamekit giggled and threw her paws up, trying to catch the butterfly. It flew away, and Flamekit began to chase after it.

"Flamekit," Suntail warned. "Stay near me."

Flamekit sighed and padded back towards her mother, walking with her through the woods. In light, the woods looked incredibly different. The trees were tall with beautiful leaves that grew from the branches. Birds chirped towards each other, and the sound of the river could be heard in the distance.

"We're almost here," Suntail told Flamekit, walking through some bushes. Flamekit followed behind joyfully, walking out to the edge of the riverbeds.

Calm bodies of water sat, a slight current nowhere in sight. Lilypads sat on the water's surface, and ducks calmly swam and dunked, coming up with vegetation clasped to their beak.

"Wow! This is amazing!" Flamekit exclaimed, padding closer to the riverbed.

"Not so fast," Suntail warned, running up to catch her. "The river beds don't possess the strong currents of the river, but they are deep enough for a kit to drown in."

"I have RiverClan blood!" Flamekit protested.

"But you're not a strong swimmer yet. Your mentor will teach you much about swimming. For now, I'll just show you how to fish," Suntail explained.

She crouched down by the edge of the river and looked down at the clear water. Flamekit looked beside her, careful not to tip too far and fall into the river.

Suntail suddenly tensed and shover her paw into the water. Moments later, she came up with a decent size fish that wiggled in her grasp. Quickly, she killed it and tossed it to the side, grinning.

"How do you do that?" Flamekit gasped.

"Six moons of apprentice training," Suntail responded. "Keep and eye on the water, and when you see movement, shove your paw into there and try to clasp onto the fish."

Flamekit nodded and watched the water, bored for a few minutes as she watched plants sway in the water. Suddenly, she saw the pale image of a fish and placed her paw in. Immediately, the fish swam off, leaving Flamekit disappointed.

"It's important not to splash the water," Suntail said. "Try to be quick, yet soft."

"That doesn't make any sense," Flamekit replied, frustrated.

Suntail laughed. "It takes moons of practice. Why don't you try again?"

And so Flamekit tried again and again, but she had no luck. She could not catch a single fish, or even get her claws into one. Once, she felt the smooth top of a fish, only to have it flee before she could get a claw into it. Giving up, she retreated with Suntail back to camp, watching her mother hold the fish she had caught earlier in her mouth with pride.

"Will I ever catch a fish?" Flamekit wondered.

Suntail nodded, though Flamekit didn't feel any better. She supposed that it was because she was only a kit though. Her mentor would teach her how to catch a fish.

Upon arriving in camp, Suntail dropped the fish on the fresh-kill pile next to other freshly caught ones. A few squirrels and birds were mixed in, though the pile consisted mostly of fish.

"Why don't we eat a small one?" Suntail suggested, grabbing a small gray fish from the pile. Flamekit bit into the slimy fish, tasting the meat and grinning. It was hard to imagine that the other three clans did not swim or fish. How was it that they fed their clans?

In RiverClan, they not only had the forest but the river. It was safe to assume that the clan would never starve.

"Hey, Flamekit!" came a call.

Flamekit turned and noticed Mothpaw approaching her.

"Mothpaw, hi!" Flamekit replied, standing up to greet her friend.

"Good morning, Mothpaw," Suntail greeted her.

"Morning, Suntail. Flamekit, Mountaineye wants me to go out and collect some more marigold. Want to come?"

"Would I!"

"No," Suntail murmured from behind her.

"Pardon?" Mothpaw asked Suntail.

"Flamekit is only allowed into the forest with either me or her father's supervision. I trust you, Mothpaw, but ever since Flamekit's encounter with the fox in the woods, we find it's best she stay out of it. She can be a bit too curious," Suntail explained, eyeing Flamekit.

Flamekit frowned and opened her mouth to protest, only to be stopped by Suntail.

"Not a word, Flamekit," Suntail growled.

"Well, that's too bad," Mothpaw sighed. "I'll go see if Rosepaw wants to come. See you later, Flamekit!"

Mothpaw went off, leaving Flamekit to sulk.

"Now, don't give me that frown," Suntail urged. "If you had not gone into the forest that night, this would not be an issue."

"I thought Goldstar was in trouble!" Flamekit shouted.

"Not every dream is from StarClan," Suntail replied, hearing Flamekit's story several times. "If your father had not rescued you

__"

"I know! I know!" Flamekit groaned. "I would've been fox meat. I'm sorry, *okay?* I don't even get to see Mothpaw that much anymore, and now you won't let me see her at all!"

"She's only collecting herbs, Flamekit. There will be other opportunities. Why don't you see if Mudkit and Oakkit want to play?"

"They never let me play," she grumbled as she followed Suntail back to the nursery. Oh, she dreamed to be an apprentice even more now.

Chapter 4

Flamekit yawned slowly as she opened her eyes to find another day had begun. RiverClan was loud and chatty as cats went about doing their daily business. Flamekit knew her apprentice ceremony was less than a moon away as she heard the frantic and excited calls of Mudkit and Oakkit, who would be becoming apprentices in moments.

Suntail lightly shoved Flamekit, though Flamekit only groaned, not wanting to rise. Her mother stood up, and Flamekit sighed, standing up next to her.

Suntail and Brownpelt's harsh laws had slowly faded, but not completely. They were still upset with her for her behavior and running into the woods that night so long ago. Still, she had been allowed to go on a short walk with Mothpaw once, and sometimes Suntail would play hide and seek by the river bed with her.

Other than that, she remained mostly in camp, usually in the nursery, where she tossed the same mossball against the den wall, awaiting the day when she would become a RiverClan apprentice.

"Mom, my fur looks fine!" Mudkit complained.

Flamekit laughed a little, knowing she would be the same kit sunrises from now when Suntail tried to make her fur look nice.

"Let's eat before the ceremony," Suntail suggested to Flamekit.

Flamekit followed her mother outside, the hot sun beating on her back. Green-leaf had almost fully arrived. The days had gotten hotter, the days longer, and more prey roamed the woods. The river had gone down some, but not too much. It was still deep enough for Flamekit to drown in.

Suntail found a fish from the fresh-kill pile and sat down. Flamekit sat down beside her, biting into the tasty fish that had been basking in the sun. One day, she hoped to catch fish as good as this one.

"Tasty, isn't it?" Suntail asked.

Flamekit nodded vigorously as she took another bite.

"Green-leaf brings all sorts of great fish," Suntail explained.

"What about the other seasons?" Flamekit asked.

"There are still a great variety of fish in leaf-fall, though soon they begin to fade away. The river freezes over in leaf-bare, which is the hardest season since we rely on the river to supply us with food. There is no fish that season. New-leaf is when the fish return," Suntail explained.

"What do you mean the fish go in leaf-bare? What do the cats eat?" Flamekit asked, surprised.

"Birds, rabbits, squirrels; they're all scarce though. Do not worry about leaf-bare yet. For now, enjoy the beginning of green-leaf," Suntail purred.

"Good morning!" came a voice.

Flamekit turned and saw her father smiling down at the two.

"Good morning, Brownpelt. Come to join us?" Suntail asked, grinning.

"Well, I guess a bite wouldn't hurt," Brownpelt purred, sitting down beside Flamekit. He took a large bite from the fish, grinning in satisfaction.

"And how are you, Flamekit?"

"Good," Flamekit mewed quietly.

"Hmph...she'll be an apprentice soon," Brownpelt observed. "Perhaps you'll be able to go on all sorts of patrols with your father. You'd like that, huh?"

Flamekit nodded quietly. It always felt awkward around her father. He was constantly busy, even though he was not deputy. Plus, she always remembered the look of disapproval when he found her in the woods that night. It was forever implanted in her mind.

"ALL CATS OLD ENOUGH TO CATCH THEIR OWN PREY JOIN BENEATH THE FALLEN TREE FOR A CLAN MEETING!" Goldstar yowled.

"That's our cue," Brownpelt murmured.

"Won't you watch the ceremony with us?" Suntail asked.

"Sure," Brownpelt replied, causing Flamekit's mouth to lift into a smile.

She padded in between her mother and father to the fallen tree where Goldstar sat with Mudkit and Oakkit, who gazed excitedly at the crowd.

Out of the corner of her eye, Flamekit could see Mothpaw

waving her tail at her. Flamekit grinned and waved back, focusing back on Goldstar.

"Mudkit and Oakkit have reached six moons, which means they are old enough to become apprentices. Mudkit, from this day forward, until you receive your warrior name, you shall be known as Mudpaw," Goldstar declared.

"Rockpelt," Goldstar called.

Flamekit turned to gaze at the tom, who stepped forward nervously. This was obviously his first apprentice since he had only been made a warrior moons before.

"You have proved to be a wise and strong warrior so far. Please, teach this onto Mudpaw," Goldstar spoke softly.

"I-I will not fail, Goldstar," Rockpelt replied.

Flamekit watched now as Mudpaw raced down the rock to touch noses with his mentor. Goldstar then continued onto Oakpaw, who too received a great mentor and smiled proudly.

Finally, as the ceremony came to an end, the whole clan began to shout, "MUDPAW! OAKPAW! MUDPAW! OAKPAW!"

Flamekit shouted along with them, secretly glad to have them out of the nursery. Now she'd be the oldest kit!

"I've got to go. I'll catch up with you later," Brownpelt said, waving good-bye to his family.

"Why does he never spend time with us?" Flamekit murmured.

Her mother, unfortunately, caught her statement.

"He is busy, Flamekit," she snapped. "Your father works hard. I hope you learn from him and become as good of a warrior as him."

Suntail stalked off, leaving Flamekit confused. Was she also upset with Brownpelt?

Flamekit shrugged, following her mother. Suddenly, Mothpaw stopped her in her footsteps.

"Hey, Flamekit!"

"Hey!" Flamekit replied.

"Mountaineye's sending me off to fetch herbs again. Now's your chance! Want to come?" she asked.

Flamekit gazed back uneasily at her mother. She had disappeared into the nursery, most likely awaiting Flamekit.

"Oh, come on," Mothpaw urged. "We never do anything together anymore."

"But Suntail," she began.

"I'll tell Mountaineye to talk to Suntail. Stay here," she called, rushing off. Flamekit awkwardly stood near the edge of camp, awaiting Mothpaw.

Suddenly, Mothpaw returned with Rosepaw, another apprentice. She was older and taller then Mothpaw, standing over her.

"You know Rosepaw, right?" Mothpaw asked.

"Somewhat," Flamekit replied.

"Are you sure we should bring a kit with us, Mothpaw?" Rosepaw asked. "She doesn't even know the woods, and we all heard what happened."

Flamekit glared at Rosepaw, angry she doubted her.

"Flamekit's almost six moons. Come on!" Mothpaw called, heading off into the woods.

Flamekit nervously followed behind, hoping Mountaineye had gotten the message off to her mother. The last thing she needed was another lecture from Suntail.

"What are we looking for?" Flamekit asked.

"Catmint," Mothpaw replied.

"But isn't that to cure greencough?" Rosepaw asked.

"Mountaineye's trying to stock up now before leaf-bare. Some twolegs like to grow it," Mothpaw replied.

"Isn't that a bit dangerous?" Flamekit asked.

"Sneaking into a twoleg's backyard? Nah," Mothpaw responded. "Our goal is to plant some of our own in the forest. Mountaineye's attempted, but he hasn't found a great spot yet. For now, we take some from the twoleg's backyard. They don't seem to notice."

Flamekit nodded, still nervous. She followed the two through the woods, scared a fox might pop out again and capture her. But the fox never came, and soon, they arrived on the outskirts of RiverClan territory, nearly on the ThunderClan border. Twoleg houses sat by the woods.

"Here we are!" Mothpaw exclaimed. "Be careful. We're sort of trespassing ThunderClan territory."

"What?!" Flamekit gasped.

"Quiet down," Rosepaw replied. "It's not a big deal. There aren't any patrols around here. We'll cover our scents later."

Flamekit nodded, slowly following the two across a strip of

land and towards a fence. She walked along the fenceline with Rosepaw and Mothpaw, nervous a ThunderClan cat might show up and rip their heads off for trespassing.

"This one," Mothpaw whispered, leaping up the wooden fence. Rosepaw followed behind her while Flamekit struggled to make her way up. Mothpaw slowly pulled her up.

"Thanks," Flamekit panted.

"I told you she'd slow us down," Rosepaw whispered.

Mothpaw ignored her and leapt down the fence. Rosepaw followed behind, Flamekit following behind them quickly. On the porch of the backyard sat pots of all sorts with flowers and vegetation growing from them. Near the last step was a large pot with growing green leaves.

Mothpaw slowly approached it and bit on the stem, beginning to break pieces off. Rosepaw grabbed a leaf from a bush and allowed Mothpaw to place the leaves in. Mothpaw held the leaf in her mouth carrying the catmint and eyed Rosepaw. As Rosepaw bit down to grab more, a shriek came from inside.

A twoleg was shouting from inside, banging on the window. Flamekit jumped, surprised, watching as Rosepaw and Mothpaw burst away. Flamekit followed behind quickly, the twoleg now making its way out of the house.

"Wait for me!" Flamekit called as she approached the fence. The two leapt up, while Flamekit struggled to climb up the fence once again.

Rosepaw grabbed onto Flamekit's paws and hoisted her up.

"Thanks," Flamekit panted.

"No time to thank me," she replied, leaping down from the fence. Flamekit leapt down and scurried back into the woods with them, adrenaline rushing through her veins.

"That was close, huh?" Mothpaw laughed.

"I thought you said they didn't mind!" Flamekit argued.

"They haven't caught me before, but I guess I'll have to find another twoleg to bother soon. Or maybe I'll just go at night."

Rosepaw giggled suddenly. "Did you see the look on that twoleg's face?"

"Priceless," Mothpaw responded. The two began laughing, and Flamekit stood, watching them in confusion. Soon, she was laughing too.

Together, they crossed back into RiverClan territory and

soon arrived back at camp. Flamekit had never felt so free and accepted. She had been on a dangerous mission with two apprentices. What other kit could say that?

As she came into camp, her mother ran to her, worried.

"Flamekit!" she shouted.

"I'm sorry!" Flamekit immediately replied.

"I'm not angry," Suntail replied. "I was just worried. When Mountaineye said you were going with Mothpaw to fetch herbs, I didn't expect you to be so long. I guess I still want a close eye on you, but you are fine, of course."

Flamekit nodded.

"I'm sorry for being so tough," Suntail sighed. "You're my only kit, but I've got to accept that you're almost an apprentice and I can't look out for you all the time anymore."

"So you're not mad?"

"No," she responded, grinning. "Come on. Let's get inside for a good night's rest."

Flamekit nodded, waving good-bye to Rosepaw and Mothpaw. She was glad her mother finally had accepted Flamekit could not be treated as a helpless kit anymore.

Chapter 5

Flamekit sat in the nursery, bored as ever. Currently, she was occupied by tossing a mossball at the wall of the nursery, watching as it bounced back. With a swipe of her paw, it would hit the wall again and land between her paws.

It was less than a moon before she was an apprentice, but lately she'd been so bored, wishing she could just become an apprentice *now*. Why did she have to wait until she was six moons? Couldn't Suntail just lie and say she was a bit older?

For the past moon, she'd sometimes hang out with Mothpaw, though Mothpaw seemed too busy with her new friend, Rosepaw. Flamekit didn't want to be jealous, but the two were becoming good friends.

Rosepaw and her brother, Bramblepaw, had just been recently made warriors though, leaving Mothpaw to continue her medicine cat training.

Plus, the little adventure they'd gone on had nearly given Flamekit a heart attack, and she hadn't fetched any more herbs with Mothpaw since despite her multiple invitations.

RiverClan was more boring than ever as green-leaf settled in. Suntail urged her to go on walks and find some excitement, exclaiming how beautiful the day was and how they could practice catching fish again.

Flamekit didn't want to be disappointed with her empty paws though, so she'd often turn her mother's requests away and sit by the entrance of the nursery, wishing she could be the apprentices that she saw returning with loads of fish and other pray.

Flamekit tensed as she felt a tail wrap around her. She turned, noticing Suntail standing over her and grinning.

"Bored, huh?" Suntail asked.

"As always," Flamekit sighed, tossing her mossball again.

"It'll be less than a moon, and then you'll be training," Suntail purred.

"But I want to train now!" Flamekit whined, pouting.

"The RiverClan law is that it must be six moons before a kit trains, and those laws were made for a reason, Flamekit. Your body

is still growing, and we wouldn't want you training when you could be in a dangerous state. Maybe Brownpelt isn't busy."

"He's always busy," Flamekit responded.

"I've talked to him, convinced him to spend some more time with his family now and then. In fact," she said, looking out the den, "I can see him by the fresh kill pile. Let's go."

Flamekit followed her mother out into the camp, watching Brownpelt's face lift up into a smile as they sat down beside him.

"Good morning, Suntail. Good morning, Flamekit," he purred.

"Lovely day," Suntail confirmed.

"You're lucky that you'll begin training when prey is so plentiful," Brownpelt explained to Flamekit. "I bet you'll come home with a fish your first day."

Flamekit grinned, though she knew Brownpelt was only trying to flatter her.

"I'm not an apprentice for several sunrises," Flamekit argued.

"They'll go by quickly," Suntail assured her, though Flamekit knew she was wrong.

"I remember when I was an apprentice and I caught my first fish, I was overjoyed," Brownpelt began. "I can remember the slimy thing between my paws, wriggling, trying to get itself free..."

Flamekit zoned out at this point as Brownpelt continued marveling about his first catch. Flamekit knew it was meant to capture her attention, but she highly doubted she'd be able to catch prey anytime soon.

"Oh, Goldstar and I would often train together!" Suntail exclaimed, reminiscing on her experience with her sister. "We'd train and practice fighting moves when we'd return home from camp. It was all good fun."

"I remember that!" Brownpelt exclaimed. "Once you hit me in the ear by accident while you two were playing."

"I apologized, and that's how I learned your name," Suntail purred. She sighed, watching as Goldstar led a patrol into camp.

"But that was before she was assigned deputy. I was proud of her, of course. But she's leader now, and she just doesn't have as much time for me anymore."

"She's got the entire clan to run," Brownpelt pointed out.

As the two spoke, Flamekit narrowed her eyes, recognizing

frustration in Goldstar's face once again. Brownpelt must've recognized it too because he got up and greeted her.

"Goldstar, are you all right?" he asked.

"Fine," Goldstar replied. "Get Mothpaw and tell her to look at Daisyflower's paw. It's got some cuts."

Suntail, hearing this, pricked her ears.

"Cuts?" she asked.

"Fox trespassed on our territory," Goldstar exclaimed. "That's the second one this moon. I don't know what they're doing here. They don't often stray on RiverClan territory too often."

"Well, at least you've sorted it out. Maybe they'll go away," Suntail offered.

"Sure, we can drive them off, but foxes can easily kill us," Goldstar replied, refusing to make eye contact with Suntail. She then padded off towards her den, leaving Flamekit to wonder if there was something else going on.

"I'll help Snowheart," Brownpelt told Suntail, leading Snowheart towards the medicine cat den.

Flamekit offered wondered why her father tried to be such an amazing warrior. Goldstar had already assigned a deputy, and unless the deputy somehow died off, Flamekit didn't think Goldstar would assign him. In fact, she often watched her walk past him most of the time, not even paying attention to him.

"Flamekit!" called Mothpaw.

Flamekit looked up, watching her tortoiseshell friend pad towards her excitedly.

"I thought Snowheart had some cuts on her paw," Flamekit said.

"She does, but Mountaineye's got it taken care of. What do you say we share a mouse and chat?" she asked.

Flamekit looked at her mother, and Suntail grinned. "I'll be in the nursery," she told Flamekit, wandering off.

Flamekit sat down beside Mothpaw as Mothpaw grabbed a small fish from the fresh-kill pile.

Flamekit bit into the fish, savoring it's tasty flavor.

"We haven't talked in awhile," Mothpaw admitted.

"No, we haven't," Flamekit agreed.

"I mean, I've asked you to come and grab supplies with me, but you always say you're busy. And when I talk to Suntail, she says you're bored out of your mind. Is something wrong?" Mothpaw

asked.

"No," Flamekit lied, taking another bite of fish.

"Come on," Mothpaw urged. "Is it because of that first time?"

Flamekit swallowed and nodded slowly.

"You're scared?" Mothpaw asked.

Flamekit moved her paws around nervously. "It's not that, really. You're forgetting I went into the woods at night when I was only a few moons old."

"Well, if you're not scared, then why won't you come?"

"It's...well...It's because of Rosepettle," she blurted out.

"What? Do you not like her?" Mothpaw asked.

"No, I do," Flamekit explained. "It's stupid, really. Just forget I said it."

"No, now you have to tell me," Mothpaw replied.

"I was...I was jealous you were hanging out with her a lot," Flamekit mewed quietly.

"Oh, that? Why are you jealous? We're still good friend aren't we? Can't I have more than one friend?" Mothpaw asked.

"Yes, it's just...you're an apprentice, so was she. I'm not even an apprentice yet," Flamekit whined.

"You will be soon. Don't worry. Rosepettle is busy with her warrior duties now. I won't be a full medicine cat apprentice for a little while longer. You're still my good friend, Flamekit. Now, do you want to come with me to get cobwebs?"

"I thought you said Mountaineye had it under control," Flamekit spoke.

"He does. We're out though and he asked me to get more," Mothpaw explained. "Come on! It'll be fun! There's no jumping fences this time, I promise."

Flamekit glanced around nervously, but she knew she could trust Mothpaw. Mothpaw was her friend, and she was right. If Flamekit kept avoiding Mothpaw, she'd just lose her friendship.

"Made up your decision?" Mothpaw asked.

"Is Rosepettle coming?" Flamekit wondered. She knew it was rude to ask, but she wanted to know if it'd just be her and Mothpaw this time.

"Nope. Just you and me," Mothpaw assured her.

"Then, I'm all for it!" Flamekit exclaimed.

"Yay!" Mothpaw cheered.

After getting her mother's permission, both Flamekit and Mothpaw padded into the woods, chatting and laughing the entire way.

Chapter 6

"Wake up! Wake up!" Flamekit shouted, shoving her mother who slept soundly in her nest. Suntail groaned and turned to the side, moaning.

"Why are you waking me up?" Suntail groaned.

"It's my apprentice ceremony today!" Flamekit squeaked, hopping up and down. "We've got to get ready!"

Suntail's eyes immediately flung open, but after seeing the dimly-lit den, she shut them once again and breathed deeply.

"Mommy!" Flamekit urged.

"The sun isn't even fully risen yet, Flamekit," Suntail argued.

Flamekit glanced around, but she didn't see what the fuss was about. Yes, queens and kits were still sleeping, and very few cats were padding around the camp at this hour, but why couldn't she prepare now? Today was her apprentice ceremony, a day she had been looking forward to for moons! Why wouldn't anyone else share in the excitement.

It took Flamekit another few minutes to get her mother up, but after a lot of shoving and whining, Suntail finally stood.

"All right! I'm up, I'm up!" she declared, standing up and shaking moss from her pelt. "Go bring back a rabbit from the fresh-kill pile. I'm starving."

Flamekit nodded, rushing outside. Adrenaline rushed through her veins as she wondered what her ceremony would be like. Who would her mentor be? What would her first day of an apprentice be like?

She paused by the fresh-kill pile, shoving through fish until she found a small rabbit that some cat had caught. Green-leaf brought not only plentiful amounts of fish but regular forest prey as well. To be honest, Flamekit preferred fish.

Flamekit dragged the prey back to the den and handed it to her mother. Suntail took a few bites, then shoved it towards Flamekit.

"Better eat up. You need all your energy for today," Suntail advised her.

"But I'm not hungry," Flamekit argued.

"Eat," Suntail commanded.

Flamekit obeyed and took a few bites of the rabbit even though she felt food wasn't needed today. After she found that Suntail was satisfied with her meal, she pushed the rabbit away and bounced up and down excitedly, watching as other cats begin to rise.

"Let me fix your fur," Suntail said at last. Flamekit groaned but let her mother lick her fur.

"Gosh, you're dirty," Suntail observed, her tongue rasping against Flamekit's fluffy fur.

"Is Daddy coming?" Flamekit asked.

"Of course he is! Why wouldn't he?" Suntail asked.

"I don't see him that often," Flamekit sighed.

"You'll be seeing him a lot more now. Plus, he'd never miss your ceremony," Suntail explained. She pricked her ears as Goldstar's yowl rang across the clan for the calling of cats together.

"Come on. It's time," Suntail purred, leading Flamekit outside. Flamekit followed her mother excitedly, racing towards the fallen tree where Goldstar made her announcements.

"This way, Flamekit," Goldstar called. Flamekit waved good-bye to her mother, knowing the next time she'd talk to her, she'd be an official apprentice.

She then padded up the log, never stepping up here before. She padded towards Goldstar, a little wobbly on her feet, and stood next to her.

"Cats of RiverClan!" Goldstar shouted. "Flamekit has reached six moons old, which means she is old enough to become an apprentice. Flamekit," Goldstar said, turning to face Flamekit. Flamekit gazed at her leader's face, amazed how much Goldstar looked like her mother, though she held a more serious face, and her eyes were duller and not as bright.

"From this day forward, until you receive your warrior name, you shall be known as Flamepaw," she announced.

Flamepaw stood, feeling a new burden placed on her. She faced the clan, listening to them chant, "FLAMEPAW! FLAMEPAW!"

Flamepaw grinned, seeing the loving faces of her parents and excited face of Mothpaw, who stood in the crowd, cheering her on.

"Dusktail," Goldstar spoke, interrupting the cheering.

Flamepaw turned, glancing around the crowd. She had

never heard much of Dusktail. In fact, she'd never actually heard his name spoken before, but she did recognize the tom that stepped forward.

He a was a medium-sized black tom with yellow eyes. She had seen him in the nursery a few times, though she did not recall who's mate he was or who he was the father of.

"Yes, Goldstar?" Dusktail asked.

"You are strong and wise. Please, teach this onto Flamepaw," Goldstar said.

"I shall," Dusktail responded.

No one moved for a moment, and Goldstar gave Flamepaw a little shove. Flamepaw, now regaining her sense of reality, moved forward and leapt off the log, running towards Dusktail and touching her nose to his.

The clan cheered at this, and more cheering erupted. Soon though, the crowds died away, and Flamepaw glanced around, trying to find cats she knew.

"Congrats, Flamepaw!" came her father's cheery voice. He padded towards her, looking more proud of her than he ever had before.

"Your father and I are so proud," Suntail purred. "Oh, you'll have a great day of training. I remember my first day."

"Me too," Brownpelt agreed, reminsicing.

"Thank you," Flamepaw replied. "I'm so glad to be out of that nursery!"

"You were ready," Suntail mewed, smiling warmly.

"Flamepaw! Congrats!" Mothpaw interrupted, knocking into Flamepaw.

"Ah!" Flamepaw shouted, becoming knocked off balance. She turned, facing Mothpaw. "Thanks."

"Have fun with Dusktail. It's odd my dad is training you," Mothpaw spoke.

"Dusktail is *your* father?!" Flamepaw gasped.

Mothpaw nodded. "You really need to know your clanmates better. Maybe I'll ask him to go easy on you," she joked, laughing. She turned, and Flamepaw did too. Dusktail stood near the forest, waiting.

"Better go to him! I'll talk to you later!" Mothpaw called.

Flamepaw said good-bye to Mothpaw and her family, then padded towards Dusktail who stood, waiting for her.

"What are the plans for today?" Flamepaw asked him.

"Border patrol and gathering moss," Dusktail responded.

"Fun," Flamepaw groaned.

"These are key things an apprentice must learn before getting into hunting and fighting," Dusktail began. Flamepaw began to drone him out as he spoke of battles and hunting and "using skills responsibly."

"What's this place?" Flamepaw asked, pointing towards some rocks that stood farther out in the forest.

"We're approaching the ThunderClan border," Dusktail explained. He stopped near a tree, and suddenly, Flamepaw could detect another smell that made her nose tickle.

"This is the ThunderClan border. Don't be stupid and cross over. Apprentices like adventure. Often times we've gotten in trouble with other clans for their idiotic decisions. But I trust you won't do that."

"Look, there's a patrol!" Flamepaw gasped, pointing to a group of cats walking by.

"Then it's best we leave. Let's head towards the river," Dusktail decided. Flamepaw followed him, already knowing where the river was located, but she supposed it didn't hurt.

Soon enough, she heard the sound of rushing water, and they stopped by the rushing river, not the river beds that Flamepaw most often would go to with her mother.

"RiverClan cats are natural swimmers, yet some always have a bit of cold feet when swimming the first time."

"My mom has taught me to swim a little," Flamepaw explained.

"Good. We encourage mothers to introduce their kits to the water early on so we don't have to spend too much time getting that situated with the water. We're not swimming today, obviously, but in the future, you will learn to swim well. It will help you catch fish, which is a necessity to your training and the future of RiverClan."

"Fishing is hard," Flamepaw admitted.

"You'll learn how to do it, as well as catching other forest prey. This way," Dusktail spoke, moving on. And so for the remainder of the day he introduced her to the woods, pointing to different clans and twoleg houses in the distance. He showed her important parts in RiverClan territory, often lecturing her.

Flamepaw knew he was only trying to be a good warrior, but she was pretty bored by the end of the day.

"One last activity," he said at last.

"What?" Flamepaw asked, her eyes widening.

"Moss-gathering!"

Flamepaw hoped he didn't hear her low groan in disappointment, but she followed him towards the river beds where damp moss grew.

"As you know, apprentices are in charge of gathering moss. I trust you'll do a good job," Dusktail explained. "Now, here's a demonstration."

She watched as he dug some moss from the ground, and once he had a fair amount, he grabbed it in his mouth and padded towards her. Dropping the moss, he lightly stepped on it. Flamepaw watched as water poured from the sides until barely anymore came out.

"You don't want it to wet or too dry. Just right," Dusktail explained. "You try. You'll be giving moss to your first elder today."

Flamepaw dug some moss from the ground until she felt she had a fair amount. She then took the moss over to Dusktail and began stepping on the moss, a little too much.

"Don't flatten it!" Dusktail warned. He examined her moss, then sighed. "It's average. I suppose No-Claw will take it."

"No-Claw?"

"One of our elders. He claims his claws fell off one winter, but I just think he his claws are too small for anyone to notice. Grab the moss, and you can bring it to him personally," Dusktail instructed.

Flamepaw nodded and grabbed the moss, following Dusktail back towards camp. When she arrived, Dusktail scooted her towards the elder den, and she awkwardly stepped inside, glancing at the few cats who slept soundly or told stories.

"Ah, it's a new apprentice!" an old ginger tabby mewed.

"I'm looking for No-Claw," Flamepaw admitted.

"Over here!" came a raspy voice.

Flamepaw turned, noticing a plump gray tom with short fur and yellow eyes. She glanced down at his paws, noticing barely any claws protruding from them.

"I've brought moss for you," she offered.

"Ah, the first nest is always the worst," he muttered,

grabbing it from her. She watched him frown a little, but he glanced back up at her with a smile.

"There's always room for improvement, uh...what did you say your name was again?" he asked.

"I'm Flamepaw. I became an apprentice today."

"Well, Flamepaw, stop by anytime! I'd love to tell you some old stories. And don't take the moss thing too seriously. You'll learn to make it just right to my liking."

"Okay. Thank you, and bye!" Flamepaw called, exiting the den. She padded towards the nursery, then stopped, aware she was now in the apprentice den. Grinning, she raced inside and found an empty nest towards the back that was suitable for her.

Tired, she yawned and shut her eyes, falling into a deep sleep.

Chapter 7

Flamepaw awoke one morning, finding all the other cats had risen and had now gone off with their mentors. Frightened by this, she ran outside, finding Dusktail waiting impatiently by the fresh kill pile.

"I was just about to come and wake you up. The morning patrol left forever ago," he complained.

"Sorry," Flamepaw gasped, out of breath from rushing towards him. Her stomach grumbled, though she supposed training was more important than breakfast.

She'd been an apprentice for seven sunrises, and for seven sunrises, she'd been struggling to adapt to the new lifestyle. Her body had not adjusted to waking up early since she was used to sleeping into late morning as a kit. With no friends to wake her, she often slept through the early morning until Dusktail found her and woke her.

As for training, it had mostly just been common sense about boundaries, predators, and gathering moss for the elders. She knew it was wrong to be impatient and seek to practice battle moves and hunting moves, but she was becoming bored with Dusktail's style of training.

"Can't I at least nibble a mouse?" Flamepaw asked as her stomach roared.

"There's no time. We're already late on our schedule."

"Why didn't you just wake me?" Flamepaw asked.

"It's not my job to wake you, but yourself. Find someone to do it for you if you must."

Flamepaw glanced down, feeling like she'd failed so far as an apprentice. Her mother often visited her and asked how she was.

Brownpelt often spoke to her, claiming they'd be going on patrols together soon. She doubted Dusktail would let her this early in training.

Flamepaw knew Dusktail was only trying to be the best mentor, and she did believe he was a good teacher, but she just found him so boring. She wondered if Goldstar had really made the best choice in assigning him as her mentor.

"What's the plan for today?" Flamepaw asked, trying to spark a bit of conversation.

"We're going to learn some beginning hunting moves," he explained.

Flamepaw grinned, beginning to bounce.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing, nothing," she responded, coming to a halt. Though she began to walk normally, she could not keep the large smile off her face. She was finally going to learn something exciting!
"But first...moss," Dusktail informed her.

"What?" Flamepaw asked. "But I usually collect that last."

"Yes, but No-Claw has mentioned his moss is a bit damp or flat sometimes. He didn't want me to talk to you, of course, but as your mentor, I want you to be the best apprentice you can be."

"By collecting the best moss?" Flamepaw asked. "How does that have anything to do with being a warrior?"

"You learn to follow instructions and perfect what you've been taught. You'll need that for when you learn actual battle and hunting moves."

"When will I need moss though?" Flamepaw asked.

"When your nest gets old, you'll learn to collect more and make it nice. That's why we fetch moss for the elders. They don't have the strength to stray into the woods too often to fix their nests. Plus, if you plan to have a mate and kits someday, you'll want them to

sleep soundly, won't you?"

Flamepaw tilted her head. Mate? Kits? She supposed she'd never thought too much about it before. She had not been drawn to any tom here, and she supposed she wouldn't for awhile.

"Fine," she growled, following Dusktail towards the river beds. It was a beautiful day, and she gasped to see a duck sitting by the pond.

She glanced at Dusktail to see if he was looking. She then stepped forward, focused on catching the duck. Perhaps she did not even need Dusktail to teach her hunting moves. If she caught this duck, he could teach her battle moves instead.

Flamepaw grinned and raced forward, leaping towards the duck. The duck called in fear and began waddling away, outstretching its brown wings. She chased it until it flew away, stumbling into the river bed.

The cold water hit her hard, and she choked on water beginning to splash around on the river bed.

"Flamepaw!" Dusktail shouted, rushing through the marshy plants.

Flamepaw was a swimmer, though no exactly a great one, and she created a fair amount of noise as she made her way back to the shore, completely soaked.

"Great. Now you've frightened all the fish!" Dusktail exclaimed. "What were you even doing?"

"There was a duck, and I thought I could catch it," Flamepaw explained, coughing up water she had accidentally swallowed.

Dusktail sighed, and Flamepaw knew he was disappointed with her. "Please, just grab the moss. Never have I had to deal with an apprentice like you before."

Flamepaw sadly made her way towards the moss that grew on the side of the beds, shivering from wind against her wet fur. She grabbed some moss with her teeth and brought it over towards

Dusktail, stomping lightly on it. Unfortunately, this action caused drops of water to drip from her pelt, and the moss ended up becoming more wet.

"Give me that," Dusktail called, grabbing the moss from her. He began stomping on it, and Flamepaw watched from the distance as he squeezed the water out.

"Dusktail, I'm sorry," she told him.

"I know you are. Just please do not try any other stupid things. We'll keep the moss here until we return," Dusktail explained.

"Aren't we learning hunting moves?"

"We're starting hunting moves on forest prey, not fish, so we'll be in the woods. Come on," he called, leading her past the river beds towards another part of the forest. She followed him, hoping he wasn't too disappointed. She knew she was a tougher apprentice for him, but she couldn't help it. She was stubborn and wanted to learn.

Dusktail stopped in a nearby clearing, ordering her to sit down. Flamepaw obeyed, gazing up at her mentor. His eyes didn't shine in disappointment anymore, but they did not gleam with pride.

"Hunting forest prey is not as common, but we rely on it especially in leaf-bare. It is a skill you must learn, which is why we'll learn it first. You'll often find some squirrels and birds around here, as well as mice. Sometimes, you'll see an occasional rabbit here. Like I said, the only time besides leaf-bare you'd catch forest prey would be on your way to the river. Fish is what we mainly eat."

Flamepaw nodded, trying to listen for once.

"So we'll start with the basic crouch position," Dusktail explained. "Allow me to demonstrate."
She watched as he crouched down, his body weight leaning on his back legs. His body arched downwards, and he kept his eyes forward, as if he were really searching for prey. His tail remained down.

"Now you try," he ordered.

Flamepaw nodded, thinking it looks easy. When she crouched however, she knew if was not.

"You need to get your body down lower," he instructed, pushing her back down with his paw. She was nearly at the floor level, and she arched her back paws, keeping her eyes peeled.

"Tail down," he reminded her.

She nodded and kept it down, trying to keep a perfect pose. Her legs were growing tired though, and she felt like giving up on the pose.

"Perfect," Dusktail said.

"Really?" she asked, standing up.

"Well, you just lost it, but let's keep practicing."

Throughout the remainder of the day, she kept practicing her pounce, eventually learning a leaping method too. It was much more exciting than what they had been learning, yet she found herself wanting to learn even more.

As Dusktail called the day to a close, Flamepaw realized how much her stomach was growling, and she nearly forgot about the moss by the riverbed. Her pelt was no longer wet after standing in the sun all day, and she found the moss still positioned nicely by the tree where Dusktail had left it.

Following Dusktail back to camp, she apologized one again for the mishap that had taken place earlier and distributed the moss to No-Claw, who expressed much gratitude for the lovely neat.
Tired and hungry, Flamepaw ate two whole fish and was working on her third when Mothpaw came over.

"Gosh, are you hungry?" she asked.

"I haven't had anything to eat at all today, and I was working hard training," Flamepaw explained.

"Well, I've got some exciting news," she purred.

"What's that?" Flamepaw asked.

"Mountaineye's making me a full medicine cat!" she exclaimed.

"Already?" Flamepaw wondered.

"He says I'm very advanced and that he's old, so he wants to take me now instead of waiting another moon or so. Oh, I can't wait to receive my new name!"

"Congrats," Flamepaw purred, taking her last bite of fish. She laid back, stuffed.

"How's training going?"

"All right. All I've managed to do so far is make a complete fool of myself."

"How?" Mothpaw asked with concern.

"Oh, I tried to catch a duck today and ended up falling into the riverbed, but it's okay. I didn't drown. Dusktail was upset though. I know I'm a tough apprentice to train. I just hope he has enough patience to train me," she sighed.

"Of course he will. Goldstar assigned him to you for a reason. Well, good luck, Flamepaw. I'll see you later with my new name!" Mothpaw purred. She bounced off, leaving Flamepaw to wonder how good of a medicine cat apprentice she was when she diets began. Obviously she was good if Mountaineye called her advance.

Sighing, Flamepaw made her way back to the apprentice den, hoping she'd become a better apprentice in no time.

Chapter 8

"Flamepaw! Flamepaw!" came Mothpaw's excited call. Flamepaw opened her eyes, finding it to be the middle of the night. The moon shined brightly, and Flamepaw slowly got used to the brightness.

As other cats mumbled in their sleep, Flamepaw carefully tiptoed over them, meeting Mothpaw outside.

"What is it?" Flamepaw whispered.

"I'm a full medicine cat!" Mothpaw exclaimed.

"Keep your voice down," Flamepaw warned. "Some cats are trying to sleep."

"Oh, right," Mothpaw responded, looking down.

"What's your new name?" Flamepaw asked.

"Mothwing," she told Flamepaw. "Mountaineye gave it to me."

"It's a pretty name, unlike Flamepaw," she groaned.

"Goldstar will give you a great name. I'm happy with Mothwing."

"So you're a full medicine cat now?"

Mothwing nodded vigorously.

"Does this mean we'll see each other less?"

"More, actually," Mothwing explained. "I no longer need to train. I'm just the back-up. Mountaineye is old though."

"How can you tell?"

"He's as old as the elders, Flamepaw. He won't retire though. He says he'll stick it out until death. That's okay. Imagine me teaching an apprentice soon."

"But Mountaineye's still alive," Flamepaw pointed out. "I'm sure you'll be a great medicine cat though."

"I hope so," Mothwing purred. "How is your training going?"

"It's okay. I better get some rest though. I don't know what Dusktail has planned tomorrow," Flamepaw admitted.

"Okay. Goodnight, Flamepaw," Mothwing whispered, padding away.

"Goodnight and congratulations," Flamepaw whispered in response, padding back to the apprentice den. There, she shut her

eyes until she fell asleep.

The sound of cats moving caused Flamepaw to awake the following morning. For once, she was not completely late, and she found herself with a little bit of time as the other apprentices began to move about and join their mentors.

Flamepaw gulped down a small fish and found Dusktail sitting near the entrance of the forest, his face in a grin.

"You weren't late today," he observed.

Flamepaw nodded. "Maybe I'm finally getting used to waking up early."

"Good. Today we're learning fishing techniques. I hope you won't be jumping into the water."

"I won't," Flamepaw assured him, shivering at her attempt to catch a duck day prior.

"Good. Let's head to the river then."

"Not the river beds?"

"You're mostly fishing in the river. By learning to fish in the hard part of the river first, fishing in the beds will be easier," Dusktail explained, leading her through the woods.

Flamepaw nodded, following him into the forest. The hot sun was soaked up in her pelt, and she was glad they were heading towards the cold river.

Hearing the sound of running water in the distance, she followed Dusktail to the river's edge.

"Unfortunately, the river's just begun to go down," Dusktail sighed. "The best time to train apprentices is in leaf-fall and new-leaf, when the river is at its fullest. The river freezes over in leaf-bare, making it unable to train apprentices whatsoever, and in green-leaf, it goes down."

"What do you do in leaf-bare then?" Flamepaw asked.

"We make holes and try to fish from there," Dusktail explained, glancing at the running water. "But green-leaf has only just begun, so we still have luck."

Flamepaw nodded, sitting down next to him by the river.

"So how do I catch a fish?" she asked.

Dusktail glanced at the water, then back up at Flamepaw. "It is hard. It took me awhile to learn how to catch a fish when I was an apprentice. But it is important you learn how."

"Okay. How do I catch it?" she repeated.

"Before you stick your paw in the water, I want you to move your paw in a scooping motion," Dusktail ordered. He turned his paw as if he were scooping something, and he swayed it back and forth, catching air.

"You try," he commanded.

Flamepaw nodded, following his example. She scooped air, feeling it whip against the pads of her paw.

"While this seems easy, a scoop is not enough. You must unsheath your claws in order to catch a fish or else it will slip from your grasp. This time scoop, but when you scoop the air, unsheath your claws as if you are catching something."

Flamepaw nodded. She moved her paw forward, feeling the air tickle her paw again. When she felt the rush of air, she unsheathed her claws, imagining a wriggling fish between them.

"Good," Dusktail purred. "Now, repeat that."

Flamepaw nodded, and for several minutes, she just repeated the action until both her paws grew weary and tired.

"Now the action is implanted into your brain," Dusktail explained. "Face the water now."

Flamepaw sat beside him and glanced down at the rippling water.

"It's best I demonstrate how to fish first. Small guppies are useless. Do not go for those. When you see a larger fish, grab it. Watch."

Flamepaw nodded, and for minutes, they sat, watching the water. No fish swam by, and Flamepaw sighed, beginning to get before.

Suddenly, a darker figure surged by, and Dusktail immediately stuck his paw into the water. From the water, she could see his paws scoop the fish. His claws were unsheathed, and she watched as they stabbed the fish, lifting it up from the water.

"Wow!" Flamepaw gasped.

"It looks simple," Dusktail explained. "But it takes practice." He tossed the dead fish to the side and looked at Flamepaw.

"You try. And don't fall in."

Flamepaw nodded, glancing at the water. The next fish came only minutes after Dusktail's. She put her paw in, only to feel the fish go right on by. She had not come close to catching it.

"That's okay. Try again," Dusktail ordered.

For minutes, Flamepaw continually tried again and again to

catch the fish, each time resulting in failure. She became frustrated, trying so hard to catch a stupid fish. Once, she managed to scoop it, but it had slipped out of her paws before she had the chance to stab it.

"Calm down for a few moments," Dusktail instructed.

Flamepaw turned towards him, frowning. "I'll never be a good RiverClan warrior."

"Yes, you will. I've never met a RiverClan cat who couldn't fish."

"Exactly. That's why I won't become one," Flamepaw pouted.

"It's only your first time trying. Now look back at the water and try once more. Then, you can gather some moss for No-Claw."

Flamepaw guessed she'd be gathering a fair amount of moss if she wasn't able to catch a fish. RiverClan was known for its fishing, so why couldn't she catch one?

As these thoughts surged through her brain, she noticed a fish move by. It was small, smaller than the one Dusktail had caught, but it still held a good amount of meat.

As if she were practicing the moves earlier, she moved her paws in the familiar motion, eyes widening as she scooped the fish, stabbing it. She felt her claws sink into the fish's scales, and she lifted it, the thing still wriggling as it died.

"By StarClan, you've caught one!" Dusktail exclaimed. "Oh, I knew I wasn't a bad mentor."

Flamepaw laughed, setting the fish down next to Dusktail's. She couldn't keep her smile off her face, and she grinned.

"This is good. We still need to practice regular hunting and swimming, of course, before we move onto battle moves, but this is great! Even I didn't catch a fish my first day."

"Maybe it was just luck," Flamepaw admitted, shrugging.

"Maybe, but you repeated the exact skills you were taught. Go grab your fish and we'll go get the moss. I'm proud of you, Flamepaw."

Flamepaw smiled, glad her mentor took pride in her work.

Upon arriving in camp, Flamepaw happily set down the fish near the fresh-kill pile and brought the moss to No-Claw, a smile on her face.

"You look happy today," No-Claw admitted.

"I caught my first fish!" she purred.

"Ah, I remember that day. It was the afternoon," he began. Flamepaw nodded, backing away as he launched into some story. She then fled towards camp, finding Brownpelt and Suntail sharing tongues.

"Mom! Dad! I caught a fish!" she exclaimed.

"Did you?" Suntail asked.

"Good for you!" Brownpelt cheered.

"It was only my first day learning too," Flamepaw purred.

"I'm proud of you, Flamepaw. I was frustrated because Goldstar caught a fish her first day and I didn't. Did you catch a fish your first time trying, Brownpelt?"

"It took me several sunrises," he admitted.

"Well, I'm glad you're doing well in training," Suntail purred. "You'll make a fine addition to RiverClan."

Flamepaw nodded and smiled, her day full of sunshine and happiness. She truly did feel like a RiverClan warrior.

Chapter 9

The success of the day seemed to fall rather short. Flamepaw had grabbed her fish from the fresh-kill pile and bit into it, wondering where Mothwing had gone. She hadn't seen her all day, and she longed to tell her friend about her exciting day.

Glancing around the RiverClan camp, she took another bite of the sweet fish, glancing around. The camp seemed rather empty, and she wondered if others were still on patrol.

Fireclaw, a ginger warrior, padded into camp seconds later, huffing and out of breath.

"G-GOLDSTAR HAS GONE MISSING!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

Gasps came from the cats, and Flamepaw dropped her fish into her paws. What did he mean Goldstar was missing? She was the RiverClan leader! She couldn't have just vanished out of thin air.

"What do you mean?" Mountainheart, the deputy, asked, stepping forward.

"She went out on morning patrol this morning and hasn't returned!" Fireclaw exclaimed.

Cats began to sigh in relief. It didn't seem like she was missing after all.

"Perhaps she has business in the forest," Mountainheart suggested.

"That's what I assumed, but I'm usually put on her patrol. She left the patrol halfway through, claiming she'd been doing some work of her own, and I haven't seen her since."

"This is nonsense," Brownpelt stated. "She'll be back soon."

"But she always comes back for an afternoon snack, doesn't she?" Fireclaw asked.

Flamepaw watched as her mother froze.

"Yes, she does," Suntail spoke quietly. "I can't imagine why she would break the warrior code and eat prey she's caught."

"We returned from patrol late morning, and since then, I have not seen her. As it came towards late afternoon, I went searching. I followed her scent, but it was stale, and it had been for

several hours. I traced it all the way to the RiverClan border until it grew dull and I could not smell it any longer," Fireclaw exclaimed.

Mountainheart seemed to be worried now. "And she did not tell you where she was going?"

"No," Fireclaw said. "I would've thought maybe you knew, Mountainheart. After all, you are RiverClan's deputy."

"She did not tell me anything," Mountainheart sighed.

"Perhaps she is only visiting Moonpool," Cherrypool, another warrior, suggested.

Cats nodded in agreement, but Mountaineye, the medicine cat, frowned.

"I would've thought she'd tell me or you, Mountainheart, if she were visiting Moonpool. RiverClan is doing well. There is no need to call upon our ancestors," Mountaineye admitted.

"Perhaps there is something she doesn't want us to know," Brownpelt suggested.

"Enough!" Mountainheart shouted. Cats grew silent, their gaze adjusted on Mountainheart.

"We do not know where Goldstar has gone. She probably is just visiting Moonpool. Still, it is odd she did not tell any cat anything. We still should send out a search patrol though," Mountainheart explained. He gazed up at the orange sky, frowning. "But we should wait until morning."

"Who knows what will happen by then!" Daisyflower shouted.

"As deputy, I am only doing what I believe is right. We may just be overreacting. We will wait until dawn, and if she hasn't returned, we will send out a search party," Mountainheart declared.

Cats nodded, some whispering among themselves. Flamepaw left her fish, suddenly not hungry, and found her mother and father.

"Mother, do you know where Goldstar has gone?" Flamepaw asked, concerned.

Suntail shook her head nervously. "No. Let's hope she just went to Moonpool."

"It seems odd she wouldn't tell the clan," Brownpelt admitted.

"Goldstar has always been mysterious," Suntail replied.

Flamepaw, knowing she could no longer help, left her parents and went around camp. What if Goldstar had truly

vanished? What would they do? Would Mountainheart become the new leader?

She'll be fine, Flamepaw told herself. After all, she was only an apprentice. She knew the warriors would take good care of it in the morning.

As the sun finally disappeared later that evening, rumor began to spread about cats who had gone out to look for Goldstar.

Flamepaw pricked her ears, trying to listen in, but it was always very secretive, and she supposed it was probably just a bit of rumors. Perhaps some cats were out hunting late at night or doing night patrols.

"Well this is just great!" came an old raspy voice. Flamepaw turned, noticing No-Claw padding up to her.

Flamepaw gazed at the tom, tilting her head.

"First Goldstar goes missing, and then Mothwing goes after her!" No-Claw exclaimed, frustrated. "Of course, it wouldn't be complete without Snowheart and Daisyflower tagging along!"

Flamepaw froze. "What do you mean? Mountainheart said he wasn't sending out patrols until the morning."

"Those stupid youngsters. They think they can find Goldstar all on their own. I hope you won't do that when you're older," he muttered.

"I'll try not to," Flamepaw admitted, but her stomach felt queasy. Her friend was out there in the woods. Though, she had two other warriors by her side. Perhaps it wasn't that bad. After all, it didn't seem like they'd be gone long...

"Yes, yes, well I suppose Mountainheart has already heard. Go get me some prey from the fresh-kill pile and I'll tell you a story," No-Claw instructed.

Flamepaw wasn't necessarily in the mood for a story, but she knew it probably would mean something to No-Claw if she stayed around and listened to him. She quickly went to the fresh-kill pile and grabbed a robin, making her way back to the elders' den where he had retreated.

No-Claw sat in the corner of the den, licking his lips as he saw the delicious robin in Flamepaw's jaws. She dropped it beside him, and he immediately licked it up. Who knew he could have such a big appetite from sitting in the den all day?

"Now," No-Claw spoke, chewing his food. "Have I told you of Goldstar's favorite kit?"

"Favorite kit?" Flamepaw asked.

No-Claw chuckled. "I suppose I haven't. I'm sure you'll have a favorite kit when you're older as well. Why, she loved that kit more than the kit's mother!"

Flamepaw sat down, suddenly intrigued by No-Claw's story.

"The kit's name was Gingerkit," No-Claw began, now finished with his meal. "Goldstar loved her dearly."

"Gingerkit. That's a nice name," Flamepaw responded.

"One day, Gingerkit became sick," No-Claw explained. "Oakleaf, the medicine cat at the time, said it was because she was not eating."

"What happened next?" Flamepaw asked. She hadn't been this into elder stories for awhile.

No-Claw yawned and stretched out, laying down instead of sitting up. "Goldstar caught fresh-kill for her and threw in some catnip or berries so she would eat them. But Gingerkit did not fancy the food, and each day, she grew hungrier and hungrier." He paused for a moment, closing his eyes and then opening them. "And the next sunrise came, and the kit did not wake. She had gone to StarClan."

"Poor Gingerkit!" Flamepaw gasped. "And poor Goldstar too."

"Yes, it was a tragic death. Goldstar often sits on the highest tree in the forest and thinks of Gingerkit from time to time. So eat well, Flamepaw. Goldstar overreacts when she sees cats are not eating enough."

"Yes, I will," Flamepaw assured him. "But Goldstar is still missing, No-Claw."

No-Claw nodded. "If only she were in the tree right now."

"I hope she's found," Flamepaw sighed. "May StarClan grant her a safe return."

"Yes," No-Claw agreed. He then shut his eyes, and Flamepaw, realizing it was time for her to sleep too, left the den and went to the apprentice den, finding her nest in the corner of the den.

She laid down and shut her eyes, falling into a deep sleep.

Flamepaw awoke to find herself in the clearing of a forest. A gentle breeze fluttered across the clearing, causing Flamepaw to shiver slightly. She glanced around, confused where she was.

"Where am I?" she wondered, glancing around.

Suddenly, she noticed a young kit running forward, a smile on her face. Her sandy fur was long and silky, and her chest was white. She stopped in front of Flamepaw, her golden eyes gazed on Flamepaw's.

"Hello, Flamepaw," the kit spoke sweetly. "My name is Gingerkit."

"Gingerkit?" Flamepaw asked. She gasped, realizing she was in StarClan. "You-you were Goldstar's favorite kit! I'm not dead, am I?"

Gingerkit giggled. "No, you're not dead. And I wouldn't say I was her favorite. She treated me awfully nice though."

Flamepaw tilted her head, admiring how Gingerkit spoke. To Flamepaw, she did not sound so much as a young kit, but as a wise leader who had lived through many seasons.

"I am only here in your dreams," Gingerkit explained. "Goldstar is in grave danger."

"Danger?" Flamepaw wondered. "What do you mean? What can I do?"

"Find her," Gingerkit said quietly. "Find her." The words repeated as Gingerkit began to fade, the words fading with her.

"Wait! Where do I start to look?!" Flamepaw called, running after the tiny she-cat who had nearly faded completely.

"Find her," she heard one last time. Then, everything faded until all Flamepaw could see were two bright green eyes, staring at her.

Then, everything darkened.

Chapter 10

Flamepaw's eyelids opened slowly to reveal an orange sky. The sun had just begun to risen, and though few cats were awake at this time, the entire clan surged with energy.

Flamepaw suddenly came to the realization for a dream, pondering if it were real or not. But her doubts ceased. It had to be Gingerkit that had visited her the night prior. It surely could not have been a silly dream.

Outside, cats yowled, arguing about searching for Goldstar. Flamepaw already could tell the she-cat had not returned due to the chaos of the clan, and cats were yelling at Mountainheart.

Flamepaw felt uneasy about all of this. First, her friend had gone off with other warriors in search for the missing leader, and now, she, a simple apprentice, had been told Goldstar was in grave danger.

Flamepaw debated talking to Mountaineye or Mountainheart about this matter, but she knew cats would only spring into even more chaos. From the den, she could see her mother frowning beside Brownpelt. Flamepaw supposed the emotional toll of missing a family member took a great effect on her.

Flamepaw slowly crept out of the den, wondering if her plan truly was smart. She thought back to when she had snuck out of camp at a few moons old. She was older now. This was different. When she was a kit, it had only been a dream, but StarClan's message surely had meaning.

Deciding not to tell anyone of her decision to look for Goldstar, she quickly slipped through the RiverClan camp, cats barely noticing her approaching the forest. She knew it was wrong not to tell Dusktail, let alone her parents, but Gingerkit had surely meant the message was for her. It was Flamepaw's duty to look for the leader, not any other cat's.

Or perhaps she was too self-centered. No, Goldstar's life was at risk. Flamepaw had to start looking immediately. Maybe if she ran into Mothwing, she could tell the she-cat of her dream and offer assistance.

Unfortunately, Mothwing had not returned, and neither had the other she-cats that had gone off to look for the golden she-cat.

Coming to the edge of camp, Flamepaw took a step forward, the woods right in front of her. She hesitantly walked into the forest, not sure where to head. Perhaps it wasn't the best decision not to tell any cat.

I'll hunt for now, she thought. Hunting helps me think.

She padded slowly through the woods, keeping her ears pricked for the sound of nearby prey. When she heard nothing, she decided to make her way to the river.

Turning to the right, she passed a clump of bushes, her footsteps the only audible sound in the forest. Suddenly, she heard frantic pawsteps, and she froze, wondering if a fox had decided to pay her another visit.

"Woah, woah, woah!" came a feminine voice.

Flamepaw turned, noticing Rosepettle. The slender white she-cat stood in front of her, a look of confusion and surprise plastered on her face.

"And where are you going?" Rosepettle demanded.

Flamepaw shuffled her paws, looking back up at the warrior. "Hello, Rosepettle," she said, greeting the she-cat. Realizing she could not lie, she looked down and spoke.

"I need to find Goldstar!" she exclaimed. "Gingerkit came to me in a dream and told me she was in grave danger and--"

"And what?" Rosepettle cut her off, her blue eyes looking at Flamepaw with concern. "You're only an apprentice, Flamepaw. You can't very well look for the leader of RiverClan yourself."

Well, that was short-lived, Flamepaw thought, expecting to have Rosepettle escort her back to camp.

"But Gingerkit told me she was in grave danger," Flamepaw protested, still persistent. "Gingerkit told this to me. I have to find her, Rosepettle!"

Rosepettle sighed, clearly feeling sorry for the young she-cat. "I miss her too, but you can't go searching for her..." She paused, and Flamepaw waited for a lecture. To her surprise, Rosepettle smiled. "Not without me coming with you!"

Flamepaw stood, flabbergasted. Rosepettle raced to the river's edge and jumped into the cold stream.

"You coming?" Rosepettle called.

Flamepaw nodded, still trying to recall what happened. Had Rosepettle agreed to search for Goldstar with Flamepaw?

Flamepaw raced after her and leapt into the water, the icy chill causing her to shiver. Currents rubbed against her, but Flamepaw had enough swimming practice to make it across the river with Rosepettle. Besides, the cold water gave her a break from the hot green-leaf sun.

Reaching the other end, Rosepettle lifted herself up onto the other side, laughing. Flamepaw lifted herself up beside her, crashing into the rocky soil.

"Why, I haven't swam like that since I was an apprentice!" Rosepettle exclaimed. "Come on!"
Flamepaw regained her breath and ran after Rosepettle, trailing behind the strenuous she-cat. Finally catching up to her, Flamepaw gasped for breath.

"You're going to need a lot more training if you're going to pant this entire trip," Rosepettle teased.

"You're serious about all of this?" Flamepaw asked.

"Why not? Mountainheart is too preoccupied to notice that we're

missing. I doubt he'll send out patrols to look for us. Besides, we won't get in trouble for looking for our leader. We are following his advice after all. Goldstar didn't come back this morning," Rosepettle noted.

Flamepaw nodded beside her, gazing around the RiverClan forest. "But my parents...I didn't tell them where I went."

"We'll find Goldstar quick. It'll only be a day or two of looking," Rosepettle assured her.

Flamepaw nodded, but she had a feeling this would be a longer quest than estimated.

They came close to the twoleg dens now, and Flamepaw shuddered at the memory of visiting the place with Mothwing and Rosepettle when she was an apprentice.

"Where are we even going?" Flamepaw asked as the woods began to disappear behind them. They had left RiverClan territory now, walking among twolegs and kittypets now.

"Don't know," Rosepettle replied. "But we've got to start somewhere."

"Why the twolegs though? Do you think Goldstar became a kittypet?" Flamepaw asked.

"Maybe the pressure of leader was too much," Rosepettle joked. "It can be that bad of a life. Free food, sleeping all day, and not worrying about clan rivalries or searching for prey."

"You're not becoming a kittypet, are you?" Flamepaw asked, concerned.

Rosepettle laughed. "No. Don't worry, RiverClan is my home. Come on. Let's check that garden up ahead!

Flamepaw nodded, trailing behind the she-cat. A white house stood near the end of the Thunderpath, green bushes growing on it. These brushes produced beautiful flowers that Flamepaw had never seen in the forest before. How was it the twolegs could be bad if they

produced such wonderful things?

She carefully approached the home with Rosepettle, unsure if this was a good idea. Quietly, she crept up upon the place with Rosepettle.

"Why are we checking here?" Flamepaw whispered.

"I smelled the faint scent of a cat nearby. And you don't need to whisper. No cat can hear you," Rosepettle explained.

Flamepaw would've felt embarrassed, but a sudden yowl caused her to jump.

"Freeze!" someone snarled.

Flamepaw turned, three cats viciously approaching. She gulped and shut her eyes, expecting the worst.

Chapter 11

"Kittypets," Rosepettle snarled, standing next to Flamepaw. Her claws were unsheathed, and Flamepaw nervously unsheathed hers, facing the three cats.

How had Flamepaw not realized they were kittypets before? All three wore collars, each a different color. A gray tabby tom stood, hissing at them. A tortoiseshell she-cat stood next to the tom, her claws unsheathed. For a kittypet's, they looked rather sharp. Lastly, a white tom with black spots stood behind them, though he didn't seem as angry as the others.

"Maybe we should go," Flamepaw whispered to Rosepettle. "They don't seem too friendly."

"They're just kittypets," Rosepettle stubbornly replied. "How hard can they be?"

As soon as she said that, the tortoiseshell leapt at Rosepettle, pinning her down. Flamepaw gasped as the tom leapt onto her and knocked her over. Gasping for breath, Flamepaw tried to remember the very few battle moves Dusktail had taught her.

She squeezed out of the tom's grasp, watching as Rosepettle stood staring at the tortoiseshell, her eyes widened. Surprisingly, these cats refused to claw. They only held down their opponents.

"Do something!" Rosepettle called to Flamepaw.

The striped gray tom was making his way towards Flamepaw again. Flamepaw bit her lip and stopped moving backwards. She had to help Rosepettle.

"STOP!" she shrieked.

All three kittypets froze, staring at Flamepaw. She knew it was only a matter of seconds before one of them launched at her again.

"We come in peace!" Flamepaw called. "We're only looking for a cat!"

All three cats exchanged glances, then retreated. The tortoiseshell let Rosepettle go, and Rosepettle immediately bolted up, shouting, "Yeah! That'll teach you not to mess with RiverClan!"

Flamepaw nervously stood. Perhaps traveling with Rosepettle was not the best decision. The she-cat was incredibly

stubborn. Who knew when she would get them into another bad situation?

The tortoiseshell only rolled her eyes. "You're looking for a cat?" she asked.

Flamepaw nodded. "Yes. Have you seen a golden she-cat go by? Her name is Goldstar."

The spotted tom shook his head. "I haven't seen a cat."

Flamepaw's heart dropped. She glanced around, then looked down at her paws. "Okay. Thank you though," she sighed. "Come on, Rosepettle. We better head off."

"Wait!" the striped tom called. It was the first time she'd heard him speak.

Flamepaw looked up, hopeful. "Yes?"

"We may not have seen the she-cat, but if you come by here again, just ask for us, and maybe we'll have seen her. I'm Smoky by the way," he said. Getting a better look at him, Flamepaw realized he was not as large as he seemed, and he had a white fuzzy belly that seemed to die down his tough image.

"I'm Neko," the spotted tom introduced himself.

"And I'm Patches. You seem like nicer clan cats. Well, except you, white kitty," Patches growled. "You're as stubborn and annoying as all the rest."

A low grumble rose in Rosepettle's throat, but Flamepaw hit her with her tail before it could advance into any harmful words.

"Thanks again," Flamepaw said to the three cats. Patches and Smoky padded away, but Neko lingered beside Rosepettle and Flamepaw.

"Your kittypet friends are waiting," Rosepettle told Neko, pointing to Smoky and Patches, who stood at the door of their twoleg nest.

"I want to come with you," Neko spoke quietly.

Rosepettle laughed. "You! A kittypet! Come with us?" She glanced at Flamepaw. Flamepaw did not laugh though but studied the tom. It seemed like he truly meant what he said.

"It's true!" Neko argued. "Please, I'd be a great addition! I want to help you find the lost cat!"

"Stop whining, softie," Rosepettle snapped. "This quest is for *clan-cats* only. And last I recalled, you're only a kittypet."

Neko sighed and dropped his tail between his legs, starting to pad away.

"Wait!" Flamepaw called, suddenly feeling sorry for the tom. Neko turned around, a hopeful expression on his face.

"Flamepaw, what are you doing?" Rosepettle whispered.

"Come on, Rosepettle. He can at least help. Maybe he'll be useful," Flamepaw whispered in return.

"Hello?" Neko asked.

"You can come with us," Flamepaw told Neko.

Neko's eyes lit up and he raced towards them. "Oh, thank you! Thank you!" he exclaimed.

"Yeah, yeah," Rosepettle grumbled. "Just don't bring your soft-hearted kittypet feelings along with you."

"Come on. Let's go!" Rosepettle called, leading them past Neko's home. Flamepaw and Neko trotted with Rosepettle. To be honest, Flamepaw was glad to have Neko with them. Perhaps he'd be able to keep Rosepettle from making bad decision, as Flamepaw had proved to be unsuccessful at that.

"So where are we heading to?" Flamepaw asked Rosepettle.

"I was thinking we continue searching the RiverClan border and around the territory," Rosepettle explained. "Then, we can head out into further forest, like near Moonstone."

"Good idea," Flamepaw agreed.

Neko was silent, probably confused. Flamepaw, however, did not feel like explaining to him all these warrior terms, so she let him walk in silence. They continued walking for awhile until Flamepaw's stomach began to rumble. She had not had anything to eat since the day before, missing her morning meal.

"Are you hungry too?" Rosepettle asked.

Flamepaw nodded.

"I'm actually a bit famished myself," Neko commented.

"You're a kittypet. You're as plump as the prey we catch," Rosepettle snapped.

"Rosepettle," Flamepaw warned.

Rosepettle sighed. "Just, forget it. Let's see if we can find some food in the forest."

Flamepaw nodded, following Rosepettle back into the woods. It was nice to be away from twolegs and in a more comfortable environment. She enjoyed smelling the scent of RiverClan all over again.

"There are so many scents here!" Neko gasped.

"There are many cats in our clan," Flamepaw explained.

"Plus, they probably just completed morning patrol."

Flamepaw's heart ached as she thought of her mother and father, who most likely were worrying sick about her. She thought of Dusktail, who was probably upset she was missing training. Still, Gingerkit had made it Flamepaw's mission to rescue Goldstar, and she would not return to RiverClan until Goldstar was with her.

Rosepettle led them to the river near the edge of the territory. Neko's eyes widened as he came towards it, and he immediately lapped at the cold water. Flamepaw, thirsty herself, lapped at the water beside him.

"This is the best water I've ever drank!" he exclaimed.

"What? Your owners just grab water from their home?" Rosepettle asked.

Neko nodded.

"Everything is fresh here!" Rosepettle explained. "And, just an F.Y.I, try to keep the kittypet comments down. I'm getting annoyed."

Neko shrunk down. "Oh, sorry," he replied.

As Rosepettle glanced in the river for a fish, Flamepaw gazed at Neko. He looked about the age of a warrior, maybe older. She couldn't help but wonder why he had quickly decided to leave his kittypet life for a little bit to help them out. Then, she saw him gazing at Rosepettle for a few seconds before turning away.

That's why, Flamepaw thought to herself. She felt her heart sink a little, which surprised her. So what if Neko had a tiny crush on Rosepettle? It wasn't like Flamepaw liked him herself... She had just met the kind tom that day.

"Water vole!" Rosepettle gasped.

Flamepaw looked up just in time to see Rosepettle leap at the river's edge. She turned around, a plump vole in her jaws.

"Eat up!" she commanded. Flamepaw took a bite, sharing the vole with Rosepettle.

Seeing Neko sitting all alone, refusing to touch the meat, Rosepettle rolled her eyes. "All right, kittypet. You can have a bite too," she sighed.

Neko grinned and took a bite at the vole, humming as he ate it. Flamepaw supposed this was the first piece of meat he had ever tasted, and she supposed he'd be left wanting more, just as Flamepaw had.

"The fish is the best," Flamepaw exclaimed. "It's what we

mostly catch. Though voles are good too."

"Are you kidding?!" Neko exclaimed. "This is the best piece of food I've ever put into my mouth!"

"Neko, your kittypet is showing," Rosepettle reminded him.

"Oh, sorry," Neko sighed. He finished up the vole, and the three sat by the edge of the river for awhile in silence.

"Maybe Goldstar is dead," Rosepettle said at last.

"Rosepettle!" Flamepaw gasped, seeing the somber expression on the white she-cat's face. "Don't say that! Gingerkit said she was only in danger, not dead."

"Who's Gingerkit?" Neko asked.

"Oh, boy," Flamepaw groaned. "This will take a lot of explaining."

And so, for quite some time, both Flamepaw and Rosepettle recounted the tale of how their leader had gone missing the day before, and against their deputy's wishes, they had decided to look for her after Flamepaw received a dream from StarClan, the place of dead cats.

"So a dead kitten talked to you?" Neko asked.

Flamepaw nodded.

"Neato!" Neko exclaimed.

"Only leaders and medicine cats can talk to them though. It's a bit odd Flamepaw could," Rosepettle explained, gazing at Flamepaw.

Flamepaw had never really thought about it before. It wasn't common for a normal apprentice to hear from StarClan. Perhaps this truly was a special case.

"I wish I could talk to dead cats," Neko sighed. "My mother...she's a dead cat."

"I'm sorry, Neko," Flamepaw sighed. She wanted to say she felt the same, but she had never lost a cat in her family before. Instead, she cleared her throat and turned to Rosepettle. "Where should we go next?" Flamepaw asked.

"This way!" Rosepettle called, leading them even further into RiverClan territory.

Chapter 12

For the next two days, the three cats scoured the RiverClan territory, searching every nook and cranny for the missing leader. Disguising their scents by rolling in onion grass, they were able to make their way through the territory without being caught by RiverClan patrols.

Flamepaw longed to tell her parents she was all right, but she knew if she returned home, Mountainheart would only scold them and punish them for searching for Goldstar. She had already seen two patrols leave the territory, but she had noticed their return shortly afterwards.

Each time patrols would come by, Rosepettle, Neko, and Flamepaw would hide in bushes and silently escape. It was a hard business sneaking around their clan territory without being noticed by other RiverClan warriors.

As Flamepaw awoke the third day, she knew they couldn't search RiverClan territory much longer. There had been no word that she had returned after eavesdropping on cats, and it had become obvious Goldstar was not in the territory.

Flamepaw got up and stretched, digging her claws into damp soil. They had slept near the river, a large rock providing them some shelter. Mostly, it was just to provide shade from the heat of green-leaf.

The rushing sound of the river calmed Flamepaw, and for a moment, she imagined herself back with Dusktail, learning to catch fish. She had not attempted to catch any prey since that day with the quest and all. Rosepettle had been hunting for them.

Flamepaw turned her head, noticing Neko and Rosepettle were still curled up asleep. Guessing it was right to do something nice for them, she padded towards the river's edge, careful to make sure no cats were nearby.

She then crouched by the edge, watching the sun rise in the horizon. Glancing down at the clear water, she looked carefully, hoping a fish would swim by.

Her eyes begin to droop minutes later, when suddenly, a dark figure came by. She quickly stuck her paw into the water and

swooped, unsheathing her sharp claws. She felt them dig into flesh, and she lifted her paw up, bringing up a wriggling fish. Quickly, she killed it, dropping it near the edge.

She grinned in delight. Her second fish! She hoped Neko and Rosepettle would enjoy it.

"Flamepaw, is that you?" Rosepettle murmured drowsily.

Flamepaw turned, grabbing the fish and padding over to the white she-cat.

"I caught us some breakfast," she whispered.

"Thank StarClan! I really wasn't in the mood to hunt!" she exclaimed, causing Neko to wake up with a jolt.

"What happened? Did we find the she-cat?" he asked frantically, glancing around.

Rosepettle laughed, shoving him with her paw. "Nope, just breakfast."

Flamepaw noticed how Rosepettle didn't seem to make fun of Neko anymore. In fact, they were almost becoming better friends.

Neko smiled weakly, glancing at Flamepaw.

"You caught this?" he asked.

Flamepaw nodded, secretly wishing he was amazed that she had caught a fish. She liked Neko, and she hoped he'd stay for awhile.

"I didn't even know you were that far in your training," Rosepettle admitted, taking a bite of fish. With her mouth full, she spoke, "I mean, I didn't catch a fish until my first moon."

"Really?" Flamepaw asked. "I felt like I was a terrible apprentice since I hadn't caught a fish my first time hunting."

"You clan cats are over-achievers," Neko muttered, chewing on fish. "I can't catch anything."

"Maybe a flower," Rosepettle joked.

Neko glared at her, but it was obvious he wasn't angry.

Rosepettle laughed, taking another bite of fish. Flamepaw smiled, glad to spend time with the cats. As a kit, she hadn't liked Rosepettle that much since she'd nearly gotten Flamepaw killed, but now, she couldn't imagine life without a friend like Rosepettle.

"What's the plan today?" Flamepaw asked.

"We head towards the northern part of the territory and explore there," Rosepettle decided.

"And if we don't find her?" Neko asked.

Rosepettle bit her lip and look up nervously. "I'll decide

when that happens."

Flamepaw nodded, taking a bite of the fish. The flavor caused her to hum, and she finished it off as Rosepettle and Neko stretched their limbs and padded around.

"Why can't you tell your clanmates about this?" Neko asked.

"I thought we went over this," Rosepettle sighed. "Our deputy didn't want anyone going out to look for the leader until we knew for certain she was missing. If he found out now that we went out, he'd punish us."

"Won't he just punish you anyway for sneaking away when you get back?" Neko asked.

"Not if we find Goldstar. Even if he wants to punish us, Goldstar will talk him out of it. She's leader, not him," Rosepettle explained. Flamepaw rolled her eyes. Rosepettle was as stubborn as they could come by.

"Should we head up the territory then?" Flamepaw asked, approaching the two. She sometimes felt awkward around them, like a third wheel. She was a tiny apprentice while these two cats were the age of warriors, older and more sophisticated than her...or for the most part anyway.

"Yeah," Rosepettle agreed. "Come on, Neko."

Flamepaw padded alongside Rosepettle, Neko trotting behind them. He was not exactly in the best shape or used to walking around for days at a time. For Flamepaw, it was a bit of a struggle too. She'd walked nonstop and explored for two full days, this being her third. Her muscles were already sore.

Rosepettle, however, did not show any signs of weakness. Flamepaw glanced at her, noticing how she held her head up with pride and padded by like she would not stop until Goldstar was found. Flamepaw was glad she had such determination. She wondered what would've happened if she went to find Goldstar all by herself. Needless to say, she'd most likely be fox prey by now.

"Wait up!" Neko huffed, running to catch up with them. Flamepaw paused, allowing him to catch up, but Rosepettle kept walking.

"Better keep running!" Rosepettle shouted, picking up her pace.

Neko was silent but rolled his eyes, now padding along with Flamepaw. She decided to keep him company, and besides, she needed to slow her pace a little too.

"Your friend is crazy," Neko muttered to Flamepaw.

"She's just looking for the leader, that's all," Flamepaw explained.

"Did she draw you into this plan?" Neko asked.

"No," Flamepaw honestly replied. "This was all my idea."

"Your idea?!" Neko was shocked. "I thought Rosepettle put this together. It seems like she's leading the quest."

"Well, I let her. She knows more than me. I'm only an apprentice. But I was the one who was told Goldstar was in danger, and I was about to set off alone to find her when Rosepettle offered to come with me," Flamepaw explained.

"You can always go back to your kittypet home!" Rosepettle called from up ahead.

Neko grinned slightly. "We're coming!" he called. Together, she padded with him up a hill, stopping near the top. They were in northern RiverClan territory now, making their way into the foothills towards WindClan territory.

As they got father away from the river, the wind picked up, and the trees were fading.

"We really are at the edge of the territory," she muttered.

"Get down!" Rosepettle shouted quickly.

Before Flamepaw had time to react, Rosepettle knocked her into a bush. Flamepaw yowled as she fell into it, but she kept quiet, Rosepettle joining her in Neko in the bush a second later.

"What was that all about?" Flamepaw hissed.

"Sh, I heard cats," Rosepettle whispered.

And it was true. Flamepaw could hear footsteps in the distance, as well as the faint sound of voices.

"I don't understand why Mountainheart won't send more patrols out," a masculine voice came. Flamepaw recognized it as her mentor, Dusktail. "Patrolling the entire border each day is enough. We know Goldstar isn't in RiverClan territory."

One of the she-cat warriors spoke back now. "Perhaps Goldstar didn't make a wise decision in choosing a deputy. Mountainheart is trying the best he can, but I have to admit, I'm not agreeing with all his choices. Have any of the cats returned?"

"No," Dusktail responded. "I haven't heard anything. How many cats is that missing? Five?"

"Yes," the she-warrior agreed. "Mountainheart mentioned that too. He wanted us to keep an eye out. He's furious, all right. All

these warriors going off to look for Goldstar. Even that young apprentice went off too."

"Yes, I know," Dusktail said. Flamepaw could detect sadness in his voice. "She was my apprentice, I her mentor. Come on. This way," he said.

Flamepaw only heard the sound of her breathing as the footsteps faded away. When they heard nothing but the wind, Rosepettle popped out of the bushes.

"Close one!" she called.

Flamepaw came out, pulling leaves and twigs from her ginger pelt. She looked down, sadness come over her.

"Everything a-okay, Flamepaw?" Neko asked.

Rosepettle looked up, not even noticing until now that Flamepaw was silent. "Flamepaw?"

"That was my mentor. He seemed sad I was missing."

"Please, we can't be sentimental now!" Rosepettle exclaimed. "You're not exiled. We're just searching! Remember what Gingerkit told you?"

Flamepaw nodded. She had to be strong. She had to follow through with this quest. Goldstar's life was in her hands. She would never be able to forgive herself if something happened to the leader and she could've prevented it.

Flamepaw shook the thought away, and for the rest of the day, they searched the northern part of the territory, leaving no stone unturned. When dusk came, Rosepettle called them together towards the edge of RiverClan territory.

"Goldstar is no longer in RiverClan territory," Rosepettle spoke.

"I think we know that," Flamepaw spoke quietly.

Rosepettle ignored her. "It was worth a shot, but I knew this was coming. Pack your bags, ladies and gentlemen, because we're leaving RiverClan territory!"

"Really? Where are we going?" Neko asked.

"That way!" Rosepettle called, pointing to the tall mountains near Moonstone. "We'll find a place to sleep once we cross over."

Flamepaw nodded, and in a few short moments, they stepped over the RiverClan boundary, the smell of water and wind, the smell of RiverClan, fading from Flamepaw all too quickly...

Chapter 13

The day's journey towards Moonstone was long, causing Flamepaw's weak muscles to ache even more and causing her to gasp for breath as altitude increased. After leaving the RiverClan border, she had become aware they could be caught by other clans and get in huge trouble.

Though this worried her, Rosepettle seemed to show no sign of concern. She happily trotted past WindClan territory up the side of the mountain, Neko struggling to keep up but always finding a way to eventually.

After a full day's journey with almost no breaks, the three finally found Mother-Mouth, home to Moonstone, when the green-leaf stars were lighting up the sky. Too exhausted to walk any further, they had all curled up nearby the cave, finding a quiet sleep.

It was Flamepaw that awoke first the next morning, stretching her aching muscles and trying to ignore the rumble of her stomach. She needed food, and though they had been eating mice and such, she longed for the sweet taste of RiverClan fish. Squirrels weren't all that they were made up to be.

She sighed and rested her head on her paws, hoping Goldstar would be found soon. This would be her fifth day away from RiverClan, and though she longed to find Goldstar, she also wanted everything to return to normal.

Gingerkit had not appeared to her with any warning or information since, making Flamepaw wonder if Goldstar was actually still in danger.

Neko let out a murmur and opened his eyes, his gaze fixed on Flamepaw.

"Morning," he mumbled, letting out a large yawn. She had to admit, even if he was a kittypet, he'd been a fun part to their expedition, even if Rosepettle seemed to only enjoy teasing him.

"Morning," Flamepaw responded, turning towards Rosepettle. The white feline was still curled up asleep, her feathery tail draped across her pink nose.

"I'm hungry," Neko complained.

"Me too," Flamepaw sighed. "Maybe there's some prey around."

"I wish I could catch prey," Neko admitted, gazing down at his spotted paws in a sorrowful manner. "I don't feel very helpful."

"But you have been," Flamepaw pointed out. "You led us through that twoleg neighborhood to avoid trespassing clan borders, and you have always been right to suggest we eat or rest."

"But that's it," Neko sighed. "I'm not a warrior like any of you."

"Just because you're not a clan cat does not mean you aren't helpful," Flamepaw assured him. She smiled warmly at the tom. She'd grown very fond of him in the past few days. His presence gave her a warm feeling in the chest.

"Rosepettle sure likes to tease me," Neko admitted.

"She teases everyone," Flamepaw explained.

"You're just being kind."

"I'm telling the truth," Flamepaw reassured him. "I'm going to look for prey. Want to come?"

"I think I'll stay here in case Rosepettle wakes up," Neko decided.

Flamepaw nodded, her heart sinking a little bit. She left Neko and wandered farther into the woods, making sure the cave was in the distance. She didn't want to lose Rosepettle and Neko. If she did, she wouldn't be able to find her way back!

She padded through the woods, the faint sounds of birds and the buzzing of bugs audible. Pricking her ears, she heard a faint squeak, turning to see a mouse crouched by a plant. The gray mouse did not spot her, and Flamepaw smiled, licking her lips. Her stomach growled, and she crouched down, leaping.

The mouse nearly leapt out of her paws as Flamepaw dug her claws into the thing, killing it. She happily took her prey in her jaws and trotted back to where Neko and Rosepettle rested. When she found them, Rosepettle was awake, chatting and laughing happily with each other.

"I caught breakfast," Flamepaw said, dropping the mouse near them.

"That's not enough," Rosepettle observed. "You eat the mouse. I'll see if I can find a squirrel for Neko and I."

"Okay," Flamepaw agreed, though she sighed. She, like Neko, sometimes didn't feel very helpful to this quest either.

As Neko trotted after her, Flamepaw took a bite of her mouse, wishing it was the slimy flesh of fish instead of this dry flavor. She gobbled the mouse up anyway though, knowing a good meal would be important.

When Rosepettle and Neko returned, she held a full rabbit in her jaws, and the two shared it.

"What's the plan?" Flamepaw asked when the two had finished their meal.

"We look around. Maybe Goldstar did go to Moonstone," Rosepettle suggested.

"But she would've returned!" Flamepaw protested. "Maybe we should go farther."

"We'll just get a quick scent and see if we pick up on anything," Rosepettle explained.

"It wouldn't hurt," Neko agreed.

Flamepaw nodded, and the three split up, sniffing around the large cave. Flamepaw sniffed for Goldstar's familiar scent of fish and salty water, but she found nothing except the smell of the forest and faint traces of prey.

"FIND ANYTHING?!" she yelled to Rosepettle on the other side.

Rosepettle shook her head. Neko, meanwhile, also sniffed around, but he could not detect scents as well as the others, leaving him to sniff around uselessly.

"Flamepaw, come here!" Rosepettle called minutes later after Flamepaw examined another part of the forest. Flamepaw quickly trotted to Rosepettle, hope fluttering through her.

"Get a scent?" Flamepaw asked.

Rosepettle shook her head, standing near the opening of Mother-Mouth. Instead, she glanced inside. Flamepaw turned her head, gasping in amazement. It was just like the stories she'd been told.

A round blue stone sat in the center of the cave, its blue lights shimmering through the darkness. It looked like a place blessed by StarClan, and Flamepaw was drawn towards it.

"Hey, what are you guys doing?!" Neko called, rushing towards them. As soon as his eyes caught onto the magnificent flame of blue, he stood in awe.

"Wow. What is this?" he asked.

"Moonstone," Rosepettle explained. "It's used to

communicate with StarClan," she explained, wandering further into the cave.

Flamepaw followed behind her, unsure of what she was doing. Goldstar's scent could not be detected here either. Searching in the cave was useless.

"Rosepettle, what are you doing?" Flamepaw wondered as Rosepettle approached the stone.

"This is a place blessed by StarClan. Maybe they'll help us!" Rosepettle suggested.

Flamepaw shook her head. "You know as well as I do that only leaders and medicine cats can use that stone."

"But come on, Flamepaw! Gingerkit spoke to you! It's got to work!" she urged.

Flamepaw shook her head. "No, it won't. Let's get out of here."

Rosepettle frowned but agreed, following Flamepaw and Neko out of the cave. With one last sniff around the territory, it was obvious that Goldstar was not here.

"Where now?" Neko asked.

"We head further into these forests. We can't stop looking for Goldstar!" Rosepettle declared.

Flamepaw nodded, and the three ventured off even further into the woods. The thought of Moonstone still remained in Flamepaw's head though as she padded through these unfamiliar woods. What if Moonstone could've worked? What if StarClan had given them an answer?

No, StarClan would've visited me in my dreams. I have to do this myself. Moonstone would not have worked, Flamepaw repeated to herself.

"You okay, Flamepaw?" Neko asked. "You're awfully quiet."

"I'm fine," Flamepaw replied.

"It's pretty boring wandering out here," Rosepettle sighed. She touched the tip of her tail to Flamepaw's ginger shoulder shouting, "Tag! You're it!"

Flamepaw, glad to play a game, laughed and ran towards Neko, touching him.

"TAG!" she shouted.

"Oh, no you don't!" Neko called, chasing her around. He approached Rosepettle now, touching her with the tip of his tail.

"Tag!" he called.

Rosepettle giggled, running after Flamepaw again. Flamepaw laughed like a young kit as she ran around an oak tree, Rosepettle fast on her heels.

"I'm going to get you!" Rosepettle called.

"I'll save you!" Neko called, leaping in front of Flamepaw.

"Tag!" Rosepettle shouted, tagging Neko.

They played like this for a few minutes more before crashing onto the ground in laughter. Flamepaw's chest ached from so much joy. She hadn't laughed or had this much fun in moons...not since she was a kit in the nursery playing with Mothwing.

Her heart longed for Mothwing. Was she safe as well? She had gone after Goldstar before Flamepaw. Perhaps she had found her by now.

They all laid on their backs, watching clouds stroll through the blue sky.

Rosepettle grinned toothily, staring at Neko, and then Flamepaw.

"That sure does pass the time," she remarked.

Flamepaw nodded.

"Come on. We've got a leader to find!" Neko exclaimed, standing up. Flamepaw stood up after him, Rosepettle the last to stand up. Grinning, they continued their quest, a bit more joyful and excited as they wandered further into the woods.

Chapter 14

Flamepaw awoke in the early morning, smacking her tongue against the roof of her mouth as her eyes focused on the forest scenery. She stood up slowly, stretching her aching legs and feet. If only they'd stolen some traveling herbs before their travel.

As Flamepaw glanced around, she could count six sunrises since their departure. And though Flamepaw had been having fun traveling with Rosepettle and Neko, she had begun to worry about Goldstar's whereabouts. Six sunrises, and they had left RiverClan territory and the entire forest, but they still had not picked up a scent of the golden she-cat.

Flamepaw sat down and licked her paw, trying to brush away the dirt and leaves that coated her fur. Traveling sure wasn't a clean business.

Rosepettle slept curled next to Neko, her feathery tail curled around both her and his nose. Flamepaw smiled lightly, glad to see the two were getting along better. She was dreading a long journey with Rosepettle snapping at Neko.

In fact, Neko seemed to be enjoying himself on the journey now. He helped sniff out for Goldstar, listen for prey. It was as if he was becoming a clan cat on his own, though he still had a lot to learn.

The other day, he'd tried to catch a plump mouse that a kit could have caught, but unfortunately, he was too slow, and the mouse ran off before Neko could sink his claws into it. That event had slowed him down a little, but Flamepaw had told him to ignore it. She wasn't a great hunter herself.

"Is it morning?" Neko muttered, opening his eyes. He stood up, the sun reflecting off the dark spots on his pelt.

"See for yourself," Flamepaw giggled, pointing up to the warm sun. She sure was glad Goldstar had decided to go missing in green-leaf. She couldn't imagine searching for the leader in the cold snow of leaf-bare.

Rosepettle stirred beside him, brushing some stray leaves off her silky white pelt. She let out a yawn, revealing all of her sharp teeth. She then grinned and stood up, smiling proudly.

"Morning!" she cheered gleefully.

"Morning," Flamepaw responded.

"Breakfast anyone?" Neko asked.

Rosepettle nodded, then pricked her ears. "I think there's a stream nearby!" she exclaimed. She turned to Flamepaw, her eyes full of light. "Let's see if we can catch some fish! I haven't had a real RiverClan meal in forever!"

"We've only been gone a few days," Flamepaw explained, but Rosepettle was too busy searching for the stream to listen.

Flamepaw and Neko trotted alongside Rosepettle until Flamepaw's ears also began to pick up the sound of rippling water. It was faint, but it was surely there.

"Do you hear it?" Rosepettle asked Flamepaw.

"I hear it," Neko confirmed.

Flamepaw nodded next to him.

Flamepaw lifted her pale nose up to the air, sniffing for the breeze of water. Suddenly, she felt a cold and crisp breeze, beads of water hanging in it.

"This way!" Flamepaw called, pointing towards some bushes.

Rosepettle and Neko slowly followed behind her. Flamepaw came through the bushes, finding a glorious stream running downhill.

"Good job, Flamepaw!" Rosepettle congratulated her.

Neko nodded beside Rosepettle.

"Come on, Neko!" Rosepettle called, calling to spotted tom forward. "I'll show you how to catch a fish."

Neko shuffled his paws, looking down with uncertainty. "I don't know if that's the best idea," he admitted nervously.

"Oh, it'll be fun!" Rosepettle assured him, motioning him forward.

Slowly, Neko came forward, and Flamepaw followed behind, sitting down some pawsteps away from Rosepettle and Neko to look for fish.

Unfortunately, the hot sun of green-leaf had caused the stream to shrink, not leaving a lot of water for fish to swim in. Flamepaw was hopeful though, and she longed to taste the salty meat of fish again.

"No, this way!" she heard Rosepettle call.

Neko plunged his paw into the water, and Rosepettle

laughed in a silly manner, demonstrating him the moves.

Flamepaw smiled, thinking of Dusktail showing her how to fish. It was a bit silly thinking of a kittypet learning to fish. Flamepaw smiled a little wider thinking about it.

Her thoughts came to a cease as she noticed a glitter of silver. She glanced below, noticing a fish swim by. Excitedly, she plunged her paw into the water and brought up the fish, tossing him onto shore.

Before she had the chance to kill it, the fish flopped around. Flamepaw chased after it, causing Rosepettle and Neko to turn around.

"Flamepaw, what are you—" Rosepettle froze as her eyes focused on the fish.

"Catch that fish!" she shouted, chasing after the fish.

Flamepaw ran after the flopping fish, praying it didn't land back into the stream. She grabbed for it, but it slipped out of her grasp.

As the fish flopped towards the shore, Rosepettle shouted, "Neko, grab that fish!"

Neko, never before being entrusted with such a duty, sliced his claws through the fish, causing it to fall limp. It wasn't the cleanest cut, but it would do.

"Thank StarClan!" Rosepettle exclaimed in an exasperated fashion. "Who wants a proper RiverClan meal?"

"I do!" Flamepaw shouted.

And so they sat near the stream's edge, each sharing a bit of fish. She had to admit, the fish from the river tasted better, but she was just glad to taste the nice, juicy meat again.

"Good catch there, Neko," Flamepaw told him.

Neko blushed. "Thanks. But you really helped, Rosepettle. Maybe I'll catch the next fish," he spoke, smiling at her.

Rosepettle turned away, bashful. "Oh, it was nothing. There's plenty of more lessons. Just call me your teacher," she spoke, standing up now.

After several minutes, all that remained of the fish were the white bones and silvery scales, leaving the others with a nice full belly for the day.

"So, do you have any idea where we are?" Flamepaw asked Rosepettle. She had been meaning to ask this question for quite awhile now, but she had waited, unsure of how Rosepettle would

react.

"Well, sort of," Rosepettle replied uneasily.

"You mean we're lost?" Neko asked.

"No, we're not lost. I could easily lead us back by Moonstone. We're just looking through these woods for any scent of Goldstar," Rosepettle explained.

"We've been in this territory for a few days," Flamepaw sighed. "And we haven't got a scent of Goldstar. Maybe we should search somewhere else."

"But what about Gingerkit, Flamepaw? Did she tell you anymore of where Goldstar might be?"

Flamepaw shook her head sadly.

"Hm, it seems to me StarClan isn't all it's cracked up to be," Neko mumbled.

"Neko, how can you say that?!" Rosepettle gasped. "Why, StarClan has always protected the clans!"

"But they haven't given you any decent directions," Neko pointed out.

"StarClan works in mysterious ways," Flamepaw spoke at last. "Let's keep searching then. Maybe we'll find some clue today."

Rosepettle nodded. "All right. We'll split up. Don't wander too far. We'll just look around the territory, sniff for Goldstar's scent, and if we don't find her, we head farther in. Sound good?"

Both Neko and Flamepaw nodded. Rosepettle's plan wasn't the most creative, but it would work.

So they split up for most of the day. At first, Flamepaw was frightened of being separated from her friends, but these woods were calm and alive with the sounds of bird and prey. It was nice to eat a plump rabbit for lunch and not have to worry about bringing it back to camp.

Flamepaw sniffed around pine trees, picking up no scents at all. At one point, she smelled the stale scent of a squirrel, but she detected no cats, no predators, and no Goldstar, for that matter.

She wondered if maybe they should just head back. It was hard to have motivation to search for a cat if you had very little directions or guesses on where to look.

She sniffed a bush full of bright green leaves, praying to pick up the scent of at least Snowheart or Mothwing, but she detected nothing at all.

The sun's rays were beginning to die down now, and the

only scents Flamepaw could detect now were Rosepettle and Neko's nearby. She supposed they'd be heading farther into the territory when she heard Neko shout.

"GUYS!" Neko shouted.

"IS IT A FOX?!" she heard Rosepettle call from far away. Neko seemed to cry loudly, and Flamepaw thought the same. She rushed over to Neko's voice, running as fast as her legs could take her.

Please let Neko be safe, she prayed.

But when Flamepaw arrived, Rosepettle arriving the exact moment, Neko stood with no one in a clearing. He only stood near a bush impatiently.

"By StarClan, you scared me!" Rosepettle shouted, whacking Neko with her paw.

"What was that for?" Neko sneered.

"For being a mouse-brain," Rosepettle joked.

"Neko, why did you call us over here?" Flamepaw asked.

"Oh, right!" Neko exclaimed, suddenly remembering. He pointed towards the bush.

"Wow, a bush. You've really outdone yourself there," Rosepettle spoke.

"Look on the bush, smart one," Neko teased.

Flamepaw and Rosepettle came closer until they noticed a clump of golden fur clinging tightly to the branches of the bush.

"I know you said your leader's name was Goldstar. I'm not good with scents, but I found this fur. Perhaps it's hers."

"One way to find out," Rosepettle murmured, sniffing the fur. Flamepaw did the same, and in an instant, her leader's scent came to her.

It smelled of the fishy scent of RiverClan, the moist waters, the crisp air. This was no doubt Goldstar's fur, and her scent was flooded all around. Even better, it was not too stale. Perhaps only a day old.

"Well, it looks like we've been given directions," Rosepettle declared.

Chapter 15

Flamepaw trotted along excitedly with Rosepettle and Neko, adrenaline rushing through her veins. They were so close to finding Goldstar, and her scent only got more clear as they continued on their way!

Rosepettle walked quickly, Flamepaw rushing after her. Poor Neko tagged along behind, not really aware of any scent. She supposed that was the downside to being the kittypet in their little search group. It was hard for him to distinguish scents as well as Flamepaw and Rosepettle.

As they came up a hill, Rosepettle stopped suddenly, causing Flamepaw to bump into her.

"Hey!" Flamepaw shouted, but Rosepttle shushed her.

Rosepettle stood on the hill, her pink nose daintily held in the air, sniffing for a scent. Flamepaw realized Goldstar's scent wasn't as apparent anymore, and she began to worry.

"You don't smell it either, do you?" Flamepaw asked Rosepettle.

"But we've been following it for miles. How could it just stop so suddenly?" Rosepettle asked. "I know it's there, but there are other scents mixed around. It's as if all of RiverClan is mixed in this scent."

"Hey, uh, what scent?" Neko asked.

Flamepaw felt bad for forgetting Neko was there.

"We're trying to detect Goldstar's scent," Flamepaw explained. She glanced down at her paws, awkwardly looking up. "We kind of lost it back there."

"So we're off track again?" Neko asked.

"No," Rosepettle replied. "The scent is just being confused with something else." She glanced around, and Flamepaw glanced around the woods from the hill too. They stretched for miles down below, making Flamepaw wonder just how many clans could fit in a forest like this.

"Where do we go?" Neko asked quietly.

Flamepaw looked to Rosepettle for further instruction.

Rosepettle frowned, pricking her ears now. Flamepaw did

the same, but she did not hear any movements. She couldn't even hear a single bird or squirrel. These woods were quiet.

"Wait," Rosepettle murmured. "Quiet down for a second."

Flamepaw held her breath, trying not to make any moves. Neko awkwardly stood, doing the same. Then, Flamepaw heard it. It was the quiet trinkle of water, not too loud, but not completely inaudible.

"Water," Flamepaw gasped.

Rosepettle nodded. "There's a stream nearby. Let's see where it goes. If Goldstar is anything like us, she'll like fishing."

"Good idea," Neko agreed.

The three turned around, listening to the distant sound of water. Flamepaw was finally able to get a scent of the stream, though it once again smelled far different than the river in RiverClan. This scent was more clear, less fishy, and smelled cool and crisp.

Rosepettle must have also caught onto the scent because she led them through the woods confidently. Neko awkwardly followed, and Flamepaw longed to reach out to him to tell him she had only just begun to distinguish scents for her own, when Rosepettle stopped.

"Why did you stop? I hear the stream!" Neko argued.

"Quiet," Rosepettle snapped. She glanced around, then continued on her way. Flamepaw tilted her head in confusion, unsure why Rosepettle had stopped randomly.

The stream grew closer as they continued across the forest floor. Flamepaw's heart began to lurch as she thought of finding Goldstar. Oh, when she returned home, she'd be a hero! She'd be congratulated, become a warrior early! She couldn't wait!

But Flamepaw realized she was forgetting the element of danger that Gingerkit had warned against. If Goldstar really was in danger, Flamepaw guessed she didn't expect to find Goldstar sitting happily near the stream's edge eating a fish.

Flamepaw could see the stream in the distance now, and Rosepettle stopped once more. Neko bumped into Flamepaw's leg, then looked up at Rosepettle and growled.

"Would you stop doing that?!" he exclaimed.

"These woods are too quiet," Rosepettle explained. "I'm going to check out the stream real fast just to make sure it's safe."

"Are you sure I shouldn't come along?" Flamepaw offered.

"Stay here with Neko. You have more training than him," Rosepettle ordered.

"Gee, I sure feel special," Neko muttered.

"You can protect Flamepaw, Neko," Rosepettle purred, making Neko feel a bit better. He smiled, and she disappeared through some bushes.

Flamepaw stood nervously with Neko, hoping no wild animal launched at them in the next few minutes, Neko impatiently pacing besides her.

"She'll be fine," Flamepaw assured Neko. "Rosepettle's a good warrior."

"I hope she's fine," Neko whined.

Suddenly, a screech came from afar, one that Flamepaw definitely recognized as Rosepettle's. She pricked her ears, and Neko turned to her, his eyes widened in fear.

"ROSEPETTLE!" Flamepaw shouted.

The scream came again, and Flamepaw and Neko immediately began racing towards her.

"Wait!" Flamepaw shouted, halting. "Maybe we should wait."

"Rosepettle's in trouble!" Neko argued.

"But I don't hear screaming anymore," Flamepaw admitted.

"So?" Neko asked.

Flamepaw was about to explain further, when she heard the distant sound of talking. Neko pushed past her in a half-sprint, and Flamepaw followed him towards where the scream had come from.

As they came closer, the talking grew louder, and Flamepaw heard Rosepettle speak.

"GUYS, COME OVER HERE!" Rosepettle shouted. She did not sound in pain, and Flamepaw nervously followed Neko to the sound of her voice. They padded alongside the stream and through some bushes.

Flamepaw carefully padded through the bushes, gasping in amazement. Next to Rosepettle sat Goldstar, Snowheart, Daisyflower, and Mothwing, all safe and unhurt.

"Goldstar, we found you!" Flamepaw exclaimed.

Mothwing turned, a look of confusion on her face. "Flamepaw, what are you doing here?"

"Thank StarClan you're alive, Goldstar!" Rosepettle exclaimed.

Flamepaw turned to Mothwing, then was distracted as Neko padded up towards Snowheart.

"You must be Goldstar."

Rosepettle chucked. "That's Snowheart, Neko. Goldstar's the ginger she-cat," she explained, pointing to Goldstar. "I thought you were the one who found the golden fur."

Neko blushed. "Oh, right."

Goldstar smiled, padding up to Neko. "And you're Neko?" she asked.

Neko nodded.

"How do you do?" Goldstar asked.

"F-Fine," Neko stammered.

Goldstar turned her attention to Flamepaw now. "Good to see you doing well, Flamepaw. Rosepettle told me this search was your idea."

Flamepaw nodded, Mothwing moving closer to her.

"I can't believe you came out here," Mothwing hissed in her ear. "Do you have any idea how much danger you could've gotten into?"

"You sound like my parents," Flamepaw groaned.

"Why have you come here, Neko?" Goldstar asked.

Rosepettle answered for him. "He wanted to help us. We were in a kittypet garden, you see, and we got attacked by three kittypets! Flamepaw was able to calm everyone down, and Neko decided he wanted to come along with us."

"Well, it's good to see you're all safe," Snowheart purred.

"Goldstar, where did you go?" Flamepaw suddenly demanded, furious that Goldstar was not in danger. She knew she should be glad, but somehow, it felt a little too easy.

Goldstar sighed. "I was hoping to be back before any cat could notice, but I've grown worried for RiverClan. We have very limited members, and I traveled here in search of more. Of course, the clan broke out in chaos. Snowheart, Daisyflower, and Mothwing found me here the other day. We were just on our way returning. Then, Rosepettle appeared and explained how you were also searching. I honestly didn't mean to cause this much fuss over me."

"The whole clan has been looking for you!" Rosepettle explained. "Why couldn't you tell anyone?"

"I was too ashamed, I guess," Goldstar sighed.

Flamepaw sighed, then glanced up at Goldstar. "Well, you're

safe now."

Goldstar nodded.

"Hey, wait a second," Snowheart gasped. She turned to Neko, her eyes widened in excitement. "How would you like to become a warrior?"

"M-Me?" Neko stammered. He was obviously taken aback by her comment. Goldstar nodded, obviously agreeing with Snowheart. Perhaps the trip had not been a waste after all.

"No, no," he quickly decided. "I enjoy my kittypet life."

"Oh," Rosepettle sighed, glancing down.

"Why so glum, sugar plum?" Neko asked, concerned.

Daisyflower turned to Flamepaw, whispering in her ear, "What's a sugar plum?"

Flamepaw shrugged. "He says weird things."

"I might miss your jabbering," Rosepettle said quietly, though it was loud enough for everyone to hear.

Flamepaw frowned. "We should be heading back. The whole clan's probably worried," she explained. She glanced at Neko, who now had a look of confusion. "We'll miss you, Neko. Thank you so much for your help."

Rosepettle turned to Neko, her eyes gleaming. "Please? For me?" she asked, licking his cheek.

Flamepaw was taken aback. She was not aware of Rosepettle's feelings for Neko...feelings that Flamepaw had felt for Neko often. It hurt her, and she stood, trying not to react.

Neko sighed. "All right."

"Yay!" Rosepettle exclaimed, licking his forehead.

Flamepaw could feel her heart breaking. She hadn't wanted to admit it, but she too had grown fond of the kittypet in a more than friendly way. Seeing him with Rosepettle made her happy, but it also hurt her. She sighed, guessing it was better to focus on the issue at hand than at this.

"Good choice," Goldstar agreed. "We can take you home first to say good-bye to your family," she offered.

Neko glanced down. "I have none..."

"You have no kin?" Rosepettle asked sadly. She nuzzled him. "You poor thing. What about those kittypets?"

"They're bullies," he sighed.

Flamepaw frowned, crystal tears gathering in her eyes. *Don't cry,*she thought. *You still have a mission. Neko's decision to like*

Rosepettle more than you is not in your control.

"Let's go then!" Snowheart decided.

Flamepaw nodded, and they all set off. She padded in the back of the group, listening to Daisyflower whisper to Goldstar, "Do you think he'll make a good warrior?"

"Yes," Goldstar replied.

"You okay?" came a voice.

Flamepaw turned, facing Mothwing.

"Oh, yes," Flamepaw responded. "I'm glad you're okay, Mothwing."

"I'm a medicine cat. I'm as tough as they can be," she joked, causing Flamepaw to laugh. Perhaps things weren't so bad after all.

At moonhigh, Daisyflower glanced around nervously, then turned to Goldstar.

"We should set up camp," she advised.

Goldstar nodded. "Good idea. My legs are sore."

Finding a clearing, they all sat down. Flamepaw curled up in between Neko and Mothwing, realizing it did not matter what she thought of Neko. She had no chance with him anyway. Still, she let out a yawn and said, "I'm glad you're coming wtiih us, Neko."

"When will we get back to camp?" Mothwing asked impatiently.

"We all need rest first," Goldstar explained.

"I'll take first guard," Daisyflower offered.

Flamepaw smiled, shut her eyes, and fell asleep.

Chapter 16

Flamepaw's eyes were shut, and she slept soundly next to the others. To her surprise, her tired thoughts began to drift away, turning into dreams.

She opened her eyes, finding herself standing in the middle of a swamp. High marshes grew all around her, the tall grasses concealing her from whatever else lurked here. Unlike StarClan, this swamp was dark and murky, but it did not feel like she was in the Dark Forest.

"Hello?" Flamepaw called, taking a step forward. She gagged as her foot sank into wet mud. A raven cawed up above, and Flamepaw shivered, not liking this place.

She took a deep breath and continued through the swamp, gazing around frightened. No creatures moved, but the swamp felt alive somehow, and it took all her might to keep on walking. Perhaps this was only but a dream.

She was wrong.

A sudden movement caught her eye, and she turned, watching marshy plants wobble with movement. Flamepaw immediately lurched after the movement, disappearing into the marsh.

"Who's there?!" she called, rushing after whatever had moved near her.

Up ahead, she could see the shape of a tiny brown kitten. Relieved, she took a deep breath. It was Gingerkit, coming to save her!

Gingerkit spun around, though something was different about her. Her eyes were a deep amber, and she stepped forward precariously, as if she did not know Flamepaw that well.

"Gingerkit," Flamepaw spoke. "Why am I here? Why did you bring me here? We've found Goldstar, Gingerkit. She's not in danger anymore."

But Gingerkit did not speak. She only looked at Flamepaw, then began to shift before Flamepaw's eyes. Flamepaw watched in amazement as Gingerkit grew, towering over Flamekit. Her pelt turned a bright red, similar to Flamepaw's.

"G-Gingerkit?" Flamepaw stammered.

Gingerkit's tail grew bushy, tipped with white. Her ears became pointed, her muzzle longer, until a full grown fox stood in front of Flamepaw, growling.

"Gingerkit!" Flamepaw shouted.

And then, Flamepaw realized the fox was holding something in its mouth. She glanced up nervously, immediately recognizing Goldstar. But this Goldstar was limp and lifeless in the fox's mouth, and Flamepaw gasped in surprise.

"GOLDSTAR, NO!" she shouted, rushing towards the fox.

A scream echoed through the air, and Flamepaw awoke, immediately recognizing it as Goldstar's. The others were still asleep, but Flamepaw knew Goldstar was in danger, even if they had found her.

"I'm coming!" she called, rushing towards where she had heard the scream. She began running, unsure if the scream had even been real or not. Perhaps it had only been a part of her dream after all.

A rustle of bushes changed Flamepaw's mind, and she leapt through them.

"Goldstar!" she called.

She was disappointed to find Snowheart standing there, her white pelt glowing in the dim moonlight.

"Snowheart?" Flamepaw asked.

She heard sudden movement, and another cat rushed through the bushes. It was Daisyflower. She ran towards the two, stopping abruptly.

"What's going on?" Daisyflower panted.

"I had a dream that Goldstar was killed by a fox, and then I heard her scream," Flamepaw explained. "I was running after her when I ran into Snowheart."

"Snowheart, you were keeping guard, weren't you?" Daisyflower asked.

"Snowheart, where's Goldstar?" Flamepaw asked nervously.

Flamepaw opened her mouth to speak, then came to a sudden gasp as a fox slipped through the bushes. Immediately, Snowheart turned on the fox, hissing wildly.

"YOU! YOU TOOK GOLDSTAR!" she spat, launching herself at the fox. The fox threw her off easily, and Flamepaw unsheathed her claws, prepared to fight.

"Fool!" he hissed at Snowheart. "You are a fool, cat! I saw what happened, but I am no cat thief!"

"So Goldstar is gone," Flamepaw breathed.

Snowheart turned, her eyes red and puffy, as if she'd been crying. "Yes. I heard her scream too. I saw a fox take her. I raced after her, but it was too late. The fox disappeared into some bushes, and I couldn't track them down. But now you're back," she snarled at the fox, launching at him again.

The fox growled and held Snowheart down. She hissed and spat at him, and Flamepaw and Daisyflower moved closer to attack.

"Stop," the fox growled at Flamepaw and Daisyflower. "Your friend needs to calm down."

"I WON'T!" Snowheart spat. "YOU TOOK OUR LEADER!"

"I won't speak until you shut up!' the fox spat.

"Please, Snowheart, calm down," Flamepaw pleaded.

Snowheart growled then became silent. The fox released her, and Snowheart stood up, still growling at the tom.

"The fox who took your friend is a traitor. His name is Fang," the fox explained. "He is not one of us."

"Well, where is Fang?" Daisyflower asked.

"Please tell us!" Flamepaw begged. "We need to find her!"

Suddenly, Rosepettle and Neko burst through the bushes.

"What is going on?!" Rosepettle exclaimed.

"Oh my goodness it's a fox!" Neko gasped. "I'm going now," he spoke, turning around.

"Oh, no you aren't!" Rosepettle snapped, stopping him.

"Do you want me to lead you to Fang or not?" the fox asked.

"Who's Fang?" Rosepettle asked.

Flamepaw quickly explained the situation to the others while the fox waited patiently to continue.

"I can lead you to Fang," the fox explained.

"GIVE US OUR LEADER BACK THEN!" Snowheart spat.

The fox looked as if he'd had enough of Snowheart's talk, but Daisyflower shushed her.

"Please, take us to her. We'll even shut Snowheart up for you," Daisyflower promised.

"Fine, but keep that cat quiet," the fox snapped. "He is in a cave nearby."

"We'll come with you," Flamepaw agreed.

It was so odd to follow a fox through the woods. Flamepaw supposed this would be an interesting story to tell to her parents when she returned to RiverClan. Well, that was if everything went well...This fox could turn on them at any moment.

"Furry mouse-brain!" Snowheart managed to shout.

The fox turned around and growled, and Daisyflower smiled weakly as she placed her tail over Snowheart's mouth.

"Wow, follow a fox through the woods. We're going to die," Neko spoke quietly.

Flamepaw wished she could tell him it would be okay, but she had no promises. She padded along with the group of cats, feeling Rosepettle brush against her.

"I don't know about this," Rosepettle whispered.

"He knows where the fox took Goldstar. He's our only chance," she replied.

The sun was just beginning to rise, allowing some light to shine across the forest. They walked a bit farther until Flamepaw could see what the fox had meant. A large cave sat on a hill, tall trees surrounding it.

Flamepaw nervously followed with the others as the fox approached, coming closer to the cave. She felt like something was wrong, and not just with the fox. It felt as if they'd forgotten to do something important back at the campsite.

"Fang should be inside the cave. Follow me," the fox called, leading the group of cats closer to the cave. He stopped outside it, then turned around.

"Thank you for your help," Flamepaw spoke.

The fox dipped his head. My, this was an odd day. A fox bowing to them?

"My name is Burdock, and I am leader of the Tribe of Scorching Fire," he explained.

"I'm Flamepaw," she responded, pointing to the others as they introduced themselves to Burdock.

Burdock smiled. "Please wait outside here. It'd be odd to bring cats into the cave without warning."

The cats nodded, patiently waiting. Suddenly, Snowheart let out a gasp.

"Where's Mothwing?!"

Flamepaw froze. Mothwing! They had forgotten all about

her!

"I thought she was with us!" Rosepettle confessed.

Daisyflower let out a scream. "She was picking herbs because she couldn't sleep! We just let her back there!"

Neko tilted his head. "And Mothwing is?"

"The other calico," Daisyflower spoke quickly.

Burdock stepped out of the den, a grave expression on his face.

"Burdock, I don't know if this will work out!" Flamepaw confessed. "We accidentally left our friend in the woods!"

"Well, I don't have much better news. It seems Fang is not in the cave. He's somewhere in the forest," Burdock explained.

Flamepaw let out a groan. Everything seemed to be going wrong!

"Well, what do we do?!" Rosepettle exclaimed. It seemed as if each cat was on their toes in this stressful situation. Did they look for Goldstar? Did they find Mothwing?

"We shouldn't split up with Fang in the forest. Maybe we should find Mothwing first," Flamepaw suggested.

"Split up! That's it!" Rosepettle exclaimed.

"That's not what I meant," Flamepaw began, but the stubborn Rosepettle once again ignored her.

"I'll go search for Mothwing. Wait here," Snowheart commanded.

Flamepaw didn't know if sending Snowheart out on her own was the best idea, but the others agreed, leaving them to sit awkwardly outside the cave while they impatiently waited for Snowheart's return.

Chapter 17

Flamepaw paced back and forth impatiently outside the foxes' cave. The others sat nearby, twitching their tails, impatiently tapping their paws on the ground. It was mid-afternoon now, and Snowheart had not returned with Goldstar.

Burdock, the kind fox, had offered them refuge in the cave, but they had refused, explaining how Snowheart would return soon. But that was hours ago, and now, all the cats were beginning to worry. Where was the leader and their friend?

"I'm bored," Neko complained.

"Why? Isn't this what kittypet life is like? Just sitting outside?" Rosepettle teased.

"Hey, I'm going to be a warrior now!" Neko argued.

"This is no time for jokes!" Daisyflower hissed. "Snowheart still hasn't returned with Mothwing or Goldstar. I'm starting to get worried."

"Me too," Flamepaw sighed.

Burdock peeped his head out of the cave. "Oh, you're still here," he spoke, stepping out. Hours ago, Flamepaw would've been frightened of the large fox, but she knew now that he never planned to hurt them in the first place.

"She's still not back," Flamepaw sighed.

Burdock frowned. "Once again, I offer the cave as shelter. Perhaps it's best you look for her."

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Flamepaw began, but Daisyflower cut her off.

"Burdock is exactly right! We can't just wait around for Snowheart and Mothwing! They could be in danger!"

"But Fang is in the forest still," Flamepaw reminded her.

"This is true," Burdock agreed.

"But they're vital to RiverClan, Flamepaw," Rosepettle argued.

Flamepaw shrunk down. It seemed like everyone was against them.

"I'll go with Neko!" Rosepettle immediately decided. Flamepaw rolled her eyes. What an obvious decision.

"I guess that leaves you and me," Daisyflower explained, poking Flamepaw with her speckled tail.

Flamepaw laughed nervously. "Yeah..."

She had never known Daisyflower that well, and she was more comfortable going with Rosepettle and Neko, but she supposed this is what Daisyflower meant by splitting up.

"Good luck finding those cats," Burdock spoke, dipping his head. "Hopefully everything goes well."

"Thank you, Burdock," Flamepaw said, leaving with Daisyflower. They walked in opposite directions, Flamepaw nervously glancing over her shoulder at Rosepettle and Neko. She knew Rosepettle could take care of herself, but what about Neko? He was only a kittypet, after all.

"Which way?" Flamepaw asked Daisyflower as they disappeared into the forest, leaving the cave behind. Flamepaw began to get nervous, wondering if Fang was lurking nearby with Goldstar's limp body hanging in her jaws.

She shuddered, and Daisyflower turned.

"Let's follow the pine tree path," she decided, pointing to a thick forest of pine trees in their direction. Flamepaw nodded, not sure why Daisyflower would've decided that way, but she supposed the senior warrior had a better idea about scouting for cats.

Flamepaw trotted alongside Daisyflower, an awkward silence forming between them. With such a gap in moons, they did not have much to talk about, and Flamepaw kicked a small pebble as they padded along.

"How is your training coming along?" Daisyflower asked.

"Oh," Flamepaw replied, surprised Daisyflower was trying to spark conversation. "Um, well, it's good...or was good. Hopefully I'll be back training soon."

"Of course," Daisyflower agreed. "An apprentice needs good training. Maybe I can teach you some tricks while we travel."

"Really?" Flamepaw asked, her voice raising.

Daisyflower nodded, smiling. "I was one of the best apprentices of my day," she purred.

Flamepaw nodded, though she didn't see it. She had never heard any cats really speak of Daisyflower, just mostly Goldstar, but then again, she had not spoken to many warriors, so perhaps Daisyflower really was a good apprentice.

"My fishing skills have definitely improved with this quest,"

she explained.

"Oh, have they?" Daisyflower asked.

Flamepaw nodded. "Rosepettle and I would catch breakfast in the morning. If I woke up before her, sometimes I'd catch us something to eat."

"Well, good for you," Daisyflower replied, glancing around the woods.

"Do you smell any scents?" Flamepaw asked.

"Quiet," Daisyflower hissed, causing Flamepaw to shrink back.

Daisyflower immediately turned to Flamepaw. "Sorry. I thought I heard something."

Flamepaw nodded, following alongside her. Pine needles prickled across her ginger pelt as they padded through the maze of pine trees. It was beginning to get uncomfortable, and Flamepaw for once wished to be ThunderClan cat. They seemed to enjoy walking through brambles, as if it were a past time hobby.

"I think I see a clearing!" Daisyflower exclaimed.

Flamepaw, happy to be free of pine trees, followed after her, noticing light peek through a hole in a bush nearby. Daisyflower padded inside the bush, Flamepaw bouncing after her. They came through the bush, stepping into a clearing.

It took Flamepaw awhile to process everything. In a split second, her joyous attitude turned into one of fear and terror.

Goldstar and Snowheart lay on the ground, limp and unmoving, blood staining their pelts. Flamepaw wasn't sure if they were alive or not, causing her heart to beat rapidly.

Following the trail of blood, Flamepaw looked up, seeing five foxes standing nearby. A larger one stood in front, obviously the leader. When he growled, one fang seemed to come down longer than the other.

"Fang," Flamepaw whispered.

Flamepaw felt Daisyflower stiffen beside her. The foxes had only just caught sight of them and now were approaching slowly. Flamepaw wanted to turn and run, but she knew she had to help her clanmates.

"Daisyflower, what do we do?" Flamepaw whispered loudly. "We can't fight all five!"

"Ah, are these the brave cats come to rescue these clanmates?" Fang growled.

"I don't know," Daisyflower honestly replied. And for once, Flamepaw was completely frightened. Not even a full grown warrior could protect her.

A sweet scented drifted past Flamepaw's nose, one she had smelled before. Gingerkit's voice whispered in her ear, *Goldstar is in grave danger.*

"I know," Flamepaw spat, not appreciating Gingerkit's obvious words.

"What?" Daisyflower asked.

"What do we do?" Flamepaw asked, the foxes coming closer. She had her eyes focused on them, watching as they approached, their claws sharp and ready to kill.

"Daisyflower," Flamepaw murmured, turning towards the she-cat. She was surprised to find the tortoiseshell gone.

"Daisyflower!" Flamepaw gasped, watching as the she-cat marched towards the foxes with no fear.

"Excuse me," she growled.

The foxes only growled back.

"I believe you have some of our friends here," she growled.

"Maybe," Fang replied.

"Daisyflower, come back!" Flamepaw called.

But the she-cat would not budge. For Flamepaw's sake, the foxes did not seem to think of her as a threat, and so none of them came towards her. All of them stood in front of Daisyflower, leaving Flamepaw to cower in fear.

"Well, that just won't do!" Daisyflower hissed, swiping Fang with her sharp claws. Blood poured from his muzzle, and he growled in anguish.

"Daisyflower, don't fight them!" Flamepaw shouted. "There are too many!"

"Is she with you?" Fang growled, pointing at Flamepaw.

"Too late, Flamepaw!" Daisyflower shouted, ignoring Fang's question.

Daisyflower let out a loud screech, meant to be a battle cry she supposed. All at once, she launched at the foxes. Flamepaw gasped, yelping as she felt fox claws rip at her pelt. She spun around, noticing a fox grinning at her maliciously.

Doing only what she could think of, she scraped at the fox's eyes, causing the fox to fall back, yelping loudly.

The foxes enclosed Daisyflower, and Flamepaw, trying to

move away from another fox approaching her, tried to get a good view of Daisyflower. As far as she knew, Daisyflower's bizarre attempt at battle was working. Blood was thrown into the air, and Flamepaw glanced, watching as blood oozed into her fur from the wound the fox had left. She was beginning to get woozy.

"Quick, get them!" Daisyflower shouted over the crowd of foxes. "While they're distracted!"

"But what about you?!" Flamepaw called.

"DO IT!" Daisyflower yowled.

Flamepaw raced towards Goldstar and Snowheart, relieved to see they were still breathing. With all her might, she grabbed them each and dragged them from the scene, glancing nervously over her shoulder to see Daisyflower still fighting. The foxes fortunately did not notice Flamepaw, and she quickly heaved the two she-cats from the clearing and into the forest.

But Flamepaw did not stop there. She heaved them for awhile longer until she was sure the foxes would not come after her. Seeing a meadow up ahead, she brought Snowheart and Goldstar there, struggling to stay awake.

As soon as she dropped them, the world began to get blurry, and Flamepaw watched as it faded from her view, trapping her in darkness.

Chapter 18

Flamepaw's eyes opened weakly, sunlight flooding her vision. She was still lying in the grassy clearing, her vision blurred. Her muscles were sore, and she winced as she felt the wound the fox had left. Dried blood was crusted onto her ginger fur, and Flamepaw gently licked the wound, glancing around.

Snowheart and Goldstar were still passed out, and for a moment, Flamepaw feared they were dead. She flicked her ear and kept her eyes focused on them though, relieved to see their steady breaths. They too had wounds, and she worried about getting them help.

Flamepaw stood up slowly. Her wound was not that bad, and within a few moments, she was able to walk again, only a slight pain spreading through her as she moved. Other than that, she surely wasn't going to die.

Goldstar groaned in her sleep, and Flamepaw approached her slowly, poking Goldstar with her tail lightly.

The golden she-cat opened her eyes, focusing on Flamepaw. Flamepaw sat down, patiently waiting for Goldstar to awake.

Goldstar lifted her head, her eyes focused on the young apprentice.

"Wh-where are the foxes?" she asked weakly, glancing around suddenly in fear. Snowheart was still passed out beside her, only her chest moving up and down.

"Daisyflower fought them," Flamepaw explained. "So I grabbed you and Snowheart and brought you here to be safe."

Flamepaw had not thought of Daisyflower, but now, her thoughts raced to her. Was the she-cat all right? She had to be. Daisyflower was a strong warrior. Perhaps she'd found Mothwing, or Rosepettle and Neko.

"Oh," Goldstar spoke, sitting up now. She winced a little at her wounds, but like Flamepaw, they didn't seem too intense. She licked her pelt, glancing around.

"What about Mothwing? Did you grab her too?" Goldstar asked.

Flamepaw's heart speed up, and her stomach clenched. "I-I

didn't see Mothwing," she admitted. "She wasn't with the foxes, was she?"

Goldstar shut her eyes in despair. "She is with them."

"I'm such a mouse-brain!" Flamepaw spat, suddenly feeling terrible. Her best friend had been in danger, and she'd left her with the foxes, including Daisyflower. What a terrible cat she was!

"I have to go back to her!" Flamepaw gasped. "Do you know where she is? Where are they keeping her?"

"I don't know where she is," Goldstar began, only to be interrupted by a rustling of bushes. Flamepaw braced herself, expecting to find foxes.

What she did not expect was to see Mothwing stagger through the bushes, dried blood on her fur, blood oozing from her wounds. A bundle of herbs was held tightly in her mouth, and she looked like a zombie coming back from the grave.

"Mothwing!" Flamepaw gasped, running to the she-cat's side. "Are you okay?"

Mothwing staggered, rasping, "Need...marigold."

Suddenly, Mothwing lost her balance, and Goldstar caught her just in time. Mothwing leaned against Goldstar's pelt, breathing raggedly. She was in great danger.

"There's no time for flowers!" Goldstar spat. "We have to heal you, Mothwing!"

"MARIGOLD!" Mothwing shrieked.

"Marigold will heal her," Flamepaw snapped at Goldstar unexpectedly. "I remember hearing Mothwing asking if I wanted to find it."

"Well, by all means, we have to get her some!" Goldstar exclaimed.

"Mothwing, where can I find some?" Flamepaw asked desperately.

Mothwing winced, clearly in a lot of pain. "Near...rocks," she rasped. She was barely breathing from the pain. Flamepaw tried to look past her wounds, but they stuck out clearly, noting how serious she needed to be healed.

"What do they look like?" Flamepaw asked, trying to remember.

"Yellow. Yellow flowers," Mothwing said, nodding to herself.

"Go get some! I'll stay with her," Goldstar commanded.

Flamepaw nodded and rushed off into the forest, looking around for any types of rocks. Her heart was pounding heavily. Mothwing could die if Flamepaw did not get these herbs. She had to get some!

She rushed through the woods until she noticed dark gray boulders. Praying to StarClan, she walked around the boulders, finding nothing but green weeds and other various flowers.

"Please, I need some marigold!" she shouted in desperation.

As if her prayers had been answered, she turned the corner to find yellow flowers sprouting from the ground. Thanking StarClan, she quickly knelt down and grabbed a mouthful, running quickly back to the clearing.

Following the stale scents she'd left, she retreated back towards the grassy meadow, relieved to find all three still alive, waiting impatiently for Flamepaw to return.

"I got them!" Flamepaw shouted, her mouth full of flowers. She stopped in front of Goldstar and Mothwing, Snowheart still asleep, and dropped the marigold next to Mothwing.

"Chew it, and put it on the wound," Mothwing advised her. Even though the marigold had not been applied, Mothwing already sounded better. Perhaps she would not die after all.

Flamepaw obeyed her and chewed the roots, gagging at the flavor. But she had to save her friend. She turned, seeing the long cut on Mothwing's leg. Flamepaw applied the substance, sympathetic of Mothwing's winces. Soon, Mothwing sighed in relief and smiled. Perhaps she would be okay after all.

Flamepaw assumed Mothwing would rest, but the young she-cat was busy. She grabbed the rest of the marigold and organized herbs, applying cobwebs to her wound next.

"Turn. I'll fix up your wound," Mothwing instructed.

Flamepaw nodded, wincing as the same substance was applied to Flamepaw's wound. Instantly though, the stinging ceased, and Flamepaw moved her body, feeling slightly better.

Mothwing stood up now, something Flamepaw was not sure she should be doing, but she watched Mothwing carefully. She inspected Goldstar and Snowheart, beginning to apply herbs to their wounds.

Flamepaw watched, concerned. Mothwing turned, facing Flamepaw.

"I'm fine, Flamepaw. You don't have to worry," she assured

her.

Flamepaw sighed in relief. "But what about Goldstar and Snowheart?" she asked.

"I don't know yet. I believe they'll be fine...or so I think," Mothwing replied, applying more herbs. She finished up, stowing the rest of the herbs by a nearby stone.

"But what about the others?" Flamepaw asked Mothwing. "What about Daisyflower, Rosepettle, and Neko?"

Goldstar had fallen asleep now, and Snowheart was still unconscious. Mothwing turned to Flamepaw, sighing.

"I don't know," she replied.

Snowheart suddenly raised her head and tried to lift herself up, only to give up and fall back down in defeat. Mothwing stroked Snowheart's pelt, coaxing her into falling back asleep.

"But we have to find them!" Flamepaw argued.

"We aren't strong enough yet. Don't worry, Flamepaw. We'll find them soon. It's already getting into evening. Perhaps we should all rest well tonight and search tomorrow. I'm sure you have information on where they are. Maybe you can help us find them," Mothwing promised.

Already evening? Flamepaw turned, seeing that indeed the sun was beginning to set. How long had she been out? She had assumed that she'd woken up in the early morning, but she really had been out longer.

Flamepaw sighed in defeat and curled up, finding herself unable to sleep. She kept worrying about Mothwing, Snowheart, and Goldstar. Would they all be okay? And what about Daisyflower? Had she fought off the foxes and managed to escape? And what about Rosepettle and Neko? They were probably still in the woods, looking for Mothwing. They too were also in danger of being caught by Fang.

Flamepaw whimpered, suddenly missing RiverClan. She missed the gentle currents of river, the taste of fresh fish, the apprentice den, her warm nest. She missed hunting with Dusktail, learning battle moves.

But most of all, she missed her parents. She missed her mother's warm smile, her father's tall figure and brave personality. She wondered if her parents missed her. After all, she'd been gone awhile now. Were they sending out patrols? Or was Mountainheart too preoccupied with finding Goldstar?

Flamepaw sighed, resting her head on her paws. She hoped they weren't in any more danger. Hadn't the foxes been enough? Had Gingerkit's grave warning been fulfilled? Flamepaw was so exhausted, she really did just want to head home. Something in her gut told her they would not be returning home for quite awhile longer.

Still exhausted from the day before, Flamepaw shut her eyes, the pain in her wound ceasing. Slowly, she fell asleep.

Chapter 19

When Flamepaw awoke the next morning, she was relieved to find Goldstar, Snowheart, and Mothwing already up, chatting eagerly. Mothwing was carefully applying more herbs to her wounds and Goldstar and Snowheart's, chatting with them quietly as not to wake Flamepaw.

Flamepaw's eyes fluttered, and finally, she forced herself to get up. Her stomach rumbled, and she realized she had not had a bite in days. The stress and frightening events that had taken place had almost made her forget her hunger.

Flamepaw's eyes locked on the nice juicy rabbit sitting near Goldstar and Snowheart. It pained Flamepaw to see them not eating it. She licked her lips, turning away as Mothwing looked up and noticed her.

"Oh, Flamepaw, you're up," Mothwing spoke.

Flamepaw turned back to the she-cat, smiling uneasily. Her stomach rumbled, and Mothwing laughed, shoving the rabbit towards her.

"We went hunting this morning," Mothwing explained. "Eat up."

"Thank you!" Flamepaw purred, gulping down the rabbit in seconds. While fish was most definitely her favorite piece of prey, this rabbit was absolutely delicious, probably because she was so hungry.

Flamepaw laid down, now quite full. The sun warmed her pelt, and she purred, feeling at peace for a few moments until she realized all of the problems they were facing. They had no idea where Daisyflower, Rosepettle, and Neko were, and Flamepaw feared they'd have to split up again. Perhaps they'd be better about it this time.

Flamepaw gasped as she felt Mothwing press marigold to her wound. Flamepaw spun around, and Mothwing smiled.

"Just applying some marigold," she assured Flamepaw. "Your wound looks a lot better."

"It feels better too. I barely even felt it," Flamepaw explained, glancing at her wound. It had already begun to heal, and

it did not even sting at any of her movements. Mothwing truly was a gifted medicine cat. Why had Flamepaw ever wanted her to become a warrior instead?

"I still feel like mouse-dung," Snowheart complained.

Flamepaw glanced up, finding it odd to actually see the she-cat awake. She too was covered in wounds, though they were more noticeable due to her white pelt. Goldstar's wounds, however, looked as they were healing, and Flamepaw sighed in relief, glad that no cat would be dying from wounds anytime soon.

"At least you can walk now, Snowheart," Mothwing teased. She stashed her herbs away in a stray leaf, glancing up at the others expectedly.

"Can we look for the others?" Flamepaw asked.

"What do you think, Goldstar?" Mothwing asked. "I didn't want to start the search until I knew you were all fit. Can you make it, Snowheart?"

"I'm a RiverClan warrior, not a kittypet," she snarled. "I could walk through ten forests without stopping!"

Mothwing laughed, Flamepaw doing the same. Snowheart sure was stubborn. Flamepaw felt a pang of sadness for Rosepettle, her other stubborn friend. Was she okay? And what about Neko? Was he all right too?

"I'm willing to search," Goldstar agreed.

"Flamepaw, do you know where any cat is?" Mothwing asked, her eyes widened with curiosity.

"Well, I don't know where Rosepettle and Neko are, but the last place I saw Daisyflower was with the foxes," Flamepaw explained.

Goldstar's eyes widened. "YOU LEFT HER WITH THE FOXES?!" she exclaimed. "HAVE YOU GONE MAD?!"

Flamepaw shrunk down, frightened by Goldstar's rage. "She-she told me to grab you guys and go! There was nothing else I could do! I'm sure she's all right," Flamepaw promised. "I was only trying to keep you guys safe."

"Don't be so harsh, Goldstar," Mothwing spoke quietly. "Flamepaw's only an apprentice."

"I'm truly sorry," Flamepaw told Goldstar. "But Daisyflower is a senior warrior. I'm sure she can take care of herself. I should go back and look for her. I guess she's my responsibility."

"What, you can't go back there!" Goldstar gasped.

Flamepaw froze, her paw halfway in the air as she turned to walk away. But she had to rescue Daisyflower, right? What if the foxes had gotten her? What if something awful had happened?

Snowheart and Mothwing stood, speechless. Was Goldstar really willing to just let one of her warriors go that easily?

"I'm kidding," Goldstar growled at last. "Mothwing, Snowheart, you search for Neko and Rosepettle. We'll look for Daisyflower. We'll meet back here by evening, okay?"

Snowheart and Mothwing nodded. Flamepaw sighed in relief, glad to not be searching alone, and glad they actually came up with a good plan this time.

"Come this way," Goldstar called, the site of the foxes apparently not unknown to her. Flamepaw trotted along nervously, praying to StarClan that Daisyflower was all right. She was such a tough warrior though. Surely she'd be fine.

Goldstar was silent as well, and Flamepaw wondered if the same thoughts crossed the leader's mind. Flamepaw felt guilty for making Goldstar come along, but she was secretly glad she had her leader's protection in case they came face to face with any foxes.

"She'll be okay," Flamepaw whispered to herself.

"What?" Goldstar asked, turning around.

"Nothing," Flamepaw replied quietly, trying to focus instead on the environment. This forest sure was different from RiverClan's. The trees were taller and thicker, there was no running river, no salty breeze hung over the air. This forest was entirely foreign to her, and she didn't feel comfortable in it.

Flamepaw suddenly smelled the familiar scent of the clearing, the place reeking of foxes. But there was another scent that Flamepaw could not quite detect, and she curiously followed Goldstar, whose pace was now quickened as they approached.

Flamepaw glanced around, the place very familiar. Only two days before she had stood here with Daisyflower, trying to think of a plan as Snowheart and Goldstar lay unconscious in the clearing.

"Through the bushes...quietly," Goldstar whispered.

Though they heard no movements, the scent of fox hung in the air, and Flamepaw quietly crept into the same bushes she had gone into with Daisyflower, peeking through the holes in the bush. While nothing stirred, Flamepaw and Goldstar were faced with a new sight.

In the clearing were four dead foxes, limp and unmoving. And in the center of them lay Daisyflower, her pelt coated in blood.

It was then Flamepaw realized that she did not only detect the scent of fox, but of blood and death.

Goldstar gasped, immediately racing through the bushes. Flamepaw followed behind, trying to keep away from the dead foxes. They reeked and looked horrid, their ginger fur coated in dried blood from two days before.

As they approached where Daisyflower lay, Flamepaw followed quietly behind Goldstar, stopping near Daisyflower's body.

"Is she...dead?" Flamepaw asked.

Flamepaw shuddered at Daisyflower's body, her beautiful fur now stained in red. She could not tell if the blood was Daisyflower's or the foxes'.

Goldstar nudged Daisyflower, then pushed her nose away. She turned her head towards Flamepaw, her eyes gleaming with tears.

"Yes..."

Flamepaw felt her heart split. She too touched Daisyflower, shuddering at the coldness of the she-cat's body. She'd been dead for at least a day.

Guilt overwhelmed her, and tears flooded her eyes.

"This is all my fault," she sobbed. "Why did I ever leave her?"

Goldstar did not make eye contact with Flamepaw and remained silent, beginning to dig into the soil. "She hunts with StarClan now," was all she said, ignoring Flamepaw's words.

Flamepaw knew that Goldstar was trying to be kind, but it was obvious Goldstar blamed her too. And honestly, who wouldn't? It was all Flamepaw's fault! If she'd never left Daisyflower, the she-cat would not be dead. It was foolish of Flamepaw to believe Daisyflower could fend off all those foxes.

But then again, wouldn't Flamepaw be killed as well? What about Snowheart and Goldstar? If they had not been taken away by Flamepaw, would their fate be the same?

Flamepaw began to help Goldstar dig the hole in silence. She glanced down as the earth came away, hoping she'd never have to dig a hole like this again. She had never witnessed the death of a cat before, and the very experience made her sick to her stomach.

Once the hole had gotten deep enough, Flamepaw helped

Goldstar lower Daisyflower's body into the hole, tears dripping down her cheeks. Goldstar and Flamepaw kept their silence, too sorrowful to speak.

Goldstar began dropping leaves on Daisyflower's body, one by one. Then, with the help of Flamepaw, they shoved the fresh soil back over Daisyflower's dead body until her pelt was no longer visible.

Flamepaw had not known Daisyflower long, but she'd been so kind. She was even going to help train Flamepaw! If only StarClan had not taken her so soon...Why couldn't Flamepaw have prevented it?

"Poor Daisyflower," she sighed. "Should we head back to the clearing?"

"Good idea," Goldstar replied quietly. She too kept her words to a minimum, saddened by the death of a great warrior.

Together, Flamepaw and Goldstar padded away from the tragic scene, Flamepaw not daring to turn her head and look back. Sticky blood clung to her paws, and she wiped at it on the forest floor, wanting all scents of the horrid place gone. But the scent hung to her nose, and she gagged, following Goldstar away from the place.

As they padded, the two kept their heads down, only looking up when Goldstar suddenly collided into another cat.

"Ouch!" shrieked Mothwing.

Flamepaw looked up, surprised. Behind Mothwing ran Rosepettle and Neko.

"Mothwing, what is it?!" Rosepettle gasped.

Flamepaw was relieved to see that both Rosepettle and Neko were unhurt.

"Goldstar, Flamepaw! We weren't expecting to see you until this evening," Rosepettle said.

"Big surprise," Mothwing murmured, rubbing her face with her tail from where Goldstar had collided with her.

Mothwing opened her mouth, ready to ask the question, but Flamepaw answered it for her.

"Daisyflower is dead," she spoke.

Neko bowed his head, as did the others. A silence rang over them until Mothwing finally spoke again.

"Were the foxes still there when you got there?"

"Only their dead bodies," Goldstar responded.

Rosepettle's eyes widened. "You don't suppose..."

But Goldstar nodded. "I have no doubt she killed each and every one of those foxes she was up against."

Neko gasped. "Cats can kill foxes?"

"Four apparently," Flamepaw answered. "Daisyflower was a great fighter, and I hope StarClan honors her courage." The other cats nodded, creating a silent environment again. "We should head back to RiverClan. We've been gone quite some time."

"Sure," Rosepettle agreed.

"Where's Snowheart?" Goldstar asked.

All three of them froze.

"Well, Snowheart actually killed Fang after he trapped me while we were searching. She scared the other ones off, and we were on our way. She ran off a few minutes ago, but I thought it was to make dirt. Didn't she come back behind you?" Mothwing asked Neko.

Neko shook his head.

"Dear StarClan, will it ever end?!" Goldstar wailed. "Come on, let's go find Snowheart and just head home!"

Flamepaw nodded, trotting behind the others. But did she really want to go home and tell the death of Daisyflower to every cat?

Chapter 20

Flamepaw unhappily trotted through the forest with the group of cats, Daisyflower's unseeing eyes still haunting her. Every time she shut her eyes she could see the scene of dead foxes, smelling the scent of death. How could she had let Daisyflower die that way?

The others were frantically searching for Snowheart's scent, though Flamepaw was in too much of a sour mood to even care. Finding Snowheart was important, but she was so sick for looking for cats at this point, she didn't put much effort into searching with the others.

"And you say she went through some bushes?" Goldstar asked.

Mothwing nodded. "Yeah."

"And she didn't tell you where she was going?" Goldstar asked, her voice raising.

Mothwing shrunk down. "No. Like I said, we thought she was just making dirt and would join us in a few minutes. I didn't notice she didn't return."

"She snuck out so silently," Neko explained. "I didn't even really notice she left."

"Why would she just leave like that?" Goldstar sighed.

Flamepaw continued walking, their conversation making its way towards her ears. She sighed, falling behind them now.

"Keep up, Flamepaw!" Goldstar snapped. Flamepaw could tell the she-cat was distressed, first losing one of her warriors, now finding another had gone missing. It had not been a very good day after all.

Flamepaw obeyed Goldstar and trotted back up towards them, sniffing the air. She caught no scent of Snowheart whatsoever.

"But why would she just leave like that?" Rosepettle complained.

"Why didn't you ask?" Mothwing snapped.

"Hey, quit fighting!" Neko shouted. "We'll find her!"

"Do you have any idea why she left, Flamepaw?" Goldstar

asked.

"Me? Why would I?" Flamepaw wondered.

"You knew where Daisyflower was," Goldstar admitted.

"Yes because that's where I left her. I haven't seen Snowheart since we parted ways. She never told me that she'd run off randomly," Flamepaw argued. "If anyone should know, it'd be Mothwing!"

All the cats turned their gaze towards the calico.

"Don't look at me! I don't know anything!" Mothwing explained.

Goldstar frowned, glancing up at the sky. Already it had begun to get into afternoon, the heat of green-leaf present in the warm forest. Flamepaw's stomach grumbled, though she ignored it, guessing food would not be an option until Snowheart was found.

"Maybe some of the foxes got her," Neko suggested.

"She killed Fang and ran off later. If the foxes took her, she wouldn't have run willingly towards them," Rosepettle reminded Neko.

"Oh...right," Neko spoke, shrinking down.

Flamepaw was beginning to get bored as they continued retracing their steps. She wished she were back in RiverClan, swimming in the cold river, catching fish, training with Dusktail. She just wished she could be an apprentice again.

A yowl came from the distance, one that was familiar to all of them.

"That's Snowheart!" Mothwing gasped.

"We'll have to tell her about Daisyflower..." Rosepettle sighed.

"Come on!" Goldstar called.

Mothwing led the way, leaping through some bushes. The others followed behind, Flamepaw struggling to keep up as they moved quickly. Flamepaw found herself in a clearing on rocky terrain, pebbles falling beneath her feet.

She yowled as a sharp one dug itself into the pad of her paw, but she continued moving, never experiencing such rough terrain before. There was nothing like this back in the forest. Out here, there were barely any trees growing, the air was cold, and clouds silently drifted by.

A rumble came, somewhat sounding like a rockslide. The cats picked up their pace, and Flamepaw got a view from up ahead.

In the distance she could see a cream-colored she-cat, lean with a feathery tail, standing near the top of some rocks, grinning maliciously.

A cloud of dust had appeared, and Flamepaw gasped now, seeing a large white tom tumble through the dust, his screams echoing throughout the clearing.

Flamepaw began to cough as the cloud of dust surged her way. The others around her did the same, and Flamepaw glanced around, trying to find where that mysterious she-cat and large white tom had gone. Most importantly, where was Snowheart?

As soon as the cloud cleared, both the tom and she-cat were gone, but Flamepaw could still detect a familiar smell that made her sick to her stomach.

"SNOWHEART!" Goldstar yowled.

"OVER HERE!" she yowled.

Turning to the left, the cats ran to their voice, finding Snowheart dangling from a large cliff. Flamepaw stopped right by the edge, gasping in fear. She glanced down, finding only clouds of dust and darkness at the bottom. It looked like a long way down.

"We heard you calling!" Neko gasped, panting as he stopped near her.

Snowheart's claws held onto the rocky terrain, and already Goldstar was beginning to help her up.

"Have you seen Korosu?" she asked.

Flamepaw tilted her head. She'd never heard of the she-cat before.

"No, was she here?" Goldstar asked curiously.

"Yeah, I wonder where she went..." Snowheart thought, getting up from the cliff now and standing beside them.

"Maybe she went on a snack break?" Neko suggested. No cat laughed.

Snowheart shook her head. "Not likely, Neko."

"We should look around," Rosepettle began, only to be cut off by the sound of more rocks crumbling down. There was a shriek, and the cats burst to the side. Every cat made it out of the way, all except for Snowheart who slipped, her claws digging into the cliff's edge as rocks tumbled over her and landed down below.

The smell of blood was evident in Flamepaw's nose, but the others did not seem to notice. There was something eery about this scene.

Snowheart let out a gasp as the dust cleared, her paws slipping from the cliff's edge.

"Guys, we've got to help Snowheart!" Flamepaw shrieked as the others regained their senses.

"Uh..." Snowheart began, her paws slipping quickly.

The cats picked up their pace and ran back to the she-cat, who was now vigorously trying to hold onto the cliff's edge. She shrieked, her paws scrambling as pebbles fell below.

"Grab her!" Goldstar shouted.

"LET GO!" came a distant echo. Flamepaw glanced around, wondering where the sound had come from.

"It's Korosu!" Snowheart shrieked. "I must let go!"

"What, are you mad?!" Rosepettle shouted, lending her paw out to help Snowheart get balance.

But Snowheart only looked at them with her one green and blue eye, then let her paws slip, tumbling into the dark abyss below without even letting out a single shriek.

"SNOWHEART!" Rosepettle shrieked.

Flamepaw stood, gasping in surprise. Why had Snowheart let go? What had even gone on? She turned to Goldstar, looking for answers.

The golden she-cat stood, glancing down blankly into the abyss.

"We've got to go after her!" Rosepettle gasped.

"Stop!" Goldstar called, holding Rosepettle back from leaping to her death.

"Goldstar, who is Korosu?" Flamepaw asked in confusion. She had expected Neko maybe to be confused as well, but all the others seemed to have a very good idea of who this mysterious cat was.

"Perhaps it is best you know the full story of Snowheart's relations with Korosu," Goldstar spoke, sitting down.

Chapter 21

"It happened long before you were born, Flamepaw," Goldstar began. "Snowheart was a young warrior, and at the time, she had just given birth to her first litter. She gave birth to a sole tom, whom she called Runningkit."

Flamepaw nodded, listening intently to the story.

"RiverClan was suffering hard that year. Leaf-bare was long and hard, and we lost many cats to greencough and other diseases. This made us weaker, and more vulnerable to other clans and rogues.

"One day, a rogue attacked our camp—a strong tom. Korosu, the slim she-cat you saw, was with him, though she remained hidden from the rest of the crowd. The tom broke into the nursery and stole Runningkit, leaving with him and Korosu. Snowheart was distraught, and we searched for nearly a moon, but they left no trace behind. Occasionally we'd hear of kits going missing in forests far from our own, and even I had been told stories of kitnapping as a kit. I believe it may be all connected somehow...

"But it's been moons since any cat has spoken of Korosu and the unknown tom. When we were coming up here, I could definitely make out Runningkit, but he surprisingly seemed to be supporting Snowheart instead of Korosu. I don't know what Korosu has planned, but she seems to be gone now. Still, I wonder where the tom went," Goldstar spoke, glancing down.

Flamepaw nodded, it all somewhat making sense. Still, that nasty scent hung in the air, Snowheart may be dead, and Runningkit and Korosu were nowhere to be found.

"That must be why she left so suddenly," Mothwing guessed. "Perhaps she caught her son's scent. I'm surprised she still remembers it."

"Or she smelled Korosu's," Goldstar responded. "But still, she has a keen nose."

"Uh...guys," Neko called, padding across some rocks. He stopped near a bush, glancing down uneasily.

"What is it?" Rosepettle asked.

Curiously, they all trotted over to where Neko stood. The

terrible scent became stronger in Flamepaw's nose, and she gasped to find the body of a dead cat lying on the ground. It was a large tom, brown with dark stripes. There was a cut across his neck, blood flowing out of it. He had only been dead a short time.

"Move out of the way," Goldstar instructed, the others obeying. She glanced at the tom with uncertainty, then nodded.

"This was the tom that stole Runningkit and worked with Korosu. I believe it was Snowheart who killed him," she suspected, grabbing white hairs that clung to the tom's wounds. "We've solved one mystery. Korosu is still missing though."

"What about Snowheart?" Rosepettle whimpered. "She-she could be *dead* down there! Are we going to save her?!"

"We'll have to see," Goldstar sighed.

"But we already lost D--" Rosepettle couldn't say the name, but Flamepaw felt her throat closing up, and she began to choke on tears. She would forever carry the burden of Daisyflower's death. The she-cat's memory haunted her every moment.

"She'll be fine," Neko assured Rosepettle.

"You-you think so?" Rosepettle asked, her eyes glittering with tears.

Neko nodded.

"Do we keep moving or wait?" Flamepaw asked.

"I'm not leaving without Snowheart!" Rosepettle shouted, stomping her foot down.

"Then I suppose we're waiting," Goldstar agreed. Leaving the tom's body, they all sat near the edge of the cliff impatiently, praying to StarClan that Snowheart would miraculously rise from the tavern below.

For awhile they just waited, Flamepaw impatiently flicking her tail. She wasn't sure what Rosepettle was trying to accomplish. There was no way Snowheart could survive the fall, right? Why were they even sitting here in the hot sun? They should be heading home...

It seemed the other cats were getting bored as well. Mothwing was sorting through her herbs for the fifth time, and Neko impatiently tapped his paw on the ground. Goldstar moved a small pebble around with her paws, and Rosepettle sat, looking as if she'd burst into tears.

There was a silence, and then Rosepettle screamed.

"I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE!" she yowled, rising to her feet

quickly. "WHAT IF SHE'S DEAD?!"

"Rosepettle," Goldstar began, but the she-cat was already in motion. Glancing back quickly, she ran to the edge of the cliff and leapt.

"NO!" Flamepaw shouted, rising to her feet.

"ROSEPETTLE!" Neko shouted, rushing to the edge. The others gathered, worried about the young warrior.

"I love you, Rosepettle," Neko whimpered quietly, though it was loud enough for Flamepaw to hear. She moved her tail, about to comfort the tom, when she decided it was best she didn't. His shoulders sagged, and he sat down, whimpering.

"She-she may not be dead," Flamepaw told him. "Besides, Mothwing, Goldstar, and I are still here."

"No..." Neko growled, standing up once more. He stood up, his tail standing high. He turned to the others, and Flamepaw curiously stared at him.

"See you in StarClan," he said, raising his tail.

"Neko, wait," Flamepaw began, but the spotted tom turned and jump, shouting in glee as he fell below. Soon, his cries died down, and Flamepaw could only imagine him landing painfully below.

"MOUSEBRAIN!" Goldstar shouted below, her shouts echoing all around them.

Flamepaw sat down, tears flooding her eyes. She turned to Goldstar and Mothwing sadly, her eyes wet.

"We lost everyone," she spoke sadly, her tail drooping. "Daisyflower, Rosepettle, Snowheart, Neko...What do we do now, Goldstar?!" she shouted, angry that everything had gone wrong. "What do we do?" she repeated more quietly.

Goldstar shrugged. "I assume the whole clan thinks we're dead by now, so there's no harm in going after them."

"Goldstar, what are you saying?" Mothwing asked.

"Here goes nothing!" Goldstar shouted, backing up.

"Goldstar!" Flamepaw shrieked. "We're going to jump down *that?!* We'll die!"

Goldstar turned to her, and for some reason, she seemed younger to Flamepaw, not as wise. She seemed stubborn, playful, like a young kit. Was this the Goldstar her mother had known?

"I didn't say you had to come with me," she told Flamepaw. "You'll make it safely home." And with that, the ginger she-cat ran

towards the edge of the cliff and flung herself downwards, disappearing into the darkness below.

Flamepaw stood, shocked, now only with Mothwing. She and the calico exchanged glances of surprise, then stood for a few moments.

"Are-are you going too?" Flamepaw asked her.

"I'm not going," Mothwing decided. "Perhaps there is something down there, but I am RiverClan's medicine cat, and they need me. I can safely take you home, Flamepaw."

Flamepaw smiled weakly, glad her friend had given her an option, but it didn't seem right. Gingerkit had wanted Flamepaw to bring Goldstar home safely, and if Flamepaw were to leave with Mothwing, she'd leave them all, not knowing if they had survived. The mystery would haunt her. Plus, she'd be given the task of saying how she was responsible for deaths, for their decisions.

"I-I don't know what to do!" Flamepaw exclaimed, tears streaming down her face. Why did such a young cat have to make a huge decision?! She wanted nothing more than to go back to her nest and live safely in RiverClan, but would that even be possible anymore? Would these memories not flood her brain?

Mothwing closed her eyes and gently rested her tail on Flamepaw's shoulder. "I have known you since you were small, Flamepaw. I even watched your mother give birth. From what I know, you always have the best decision in mind. You are selfless and brave. Do what your heart tells you," she spoke, beginning to walk away.

Flamepaw stood, wishing Mothwing could give her more time. But the she-cat was already walking away, and Flamepaw had to decide now. Go with Mothwing or jump over the cliff? Any other cat would choose going home, but Flamepaw turned back to the cliff.

"I-I...Rosepettle is my friend, but so are you, Mothwing!" she called, looking back at the cliff with uncertainty. She shut her eyes, the tears now coming to a cease. Whatever Mothwing had said had motivated her. Perhaps she really was braver and stronger than she thought. She was an apprentice on a dangerous mission, making decisions many other warriors would never make.

"I'm sorry, Mothwing," she whispered at last, watching as the she-cat disappeared into the forest. "But Gingerkit made me promise to keep Goldstar safe."

And without further ado, Flamepaw rushed towards the edge of the cliff and leapt into the air, falling below into the darkness without even echoing the tiniest scream.

Chapter 22

Flamepaw expected herself to be dead the moment she leapt off the cliff, but instead, she found herself flying through darkness, wind blowing against her fur as she made her descent into further darkness, the bright sun vanishing ahead and being replaced by a thick layer of fog.

Flamepaw shut her eyes as she fell quickly, expecting the landing to be painful. But she kept falling, bracing herself and wincing as she felt herself get nearer and nearer to the floor. Why had she jumped? Her death would surely be painful. This was all a bad idea. She should've gone back with Mothwing.

Flamepaw shook her head, knowing she was only thinking this because she was scared. She held her breath, knowing that she had to help Gingerkit by keeping Goldstar safe. Shrieking, she saw the ground and below and positioned her body as to land on all fours.

Unfortunately, she was not extremely skilled at this, and she hit the ground with a thud, moaning as she felt every muscle in her body ache. Glancing up, she realized she was very much alive, and the fall had not killed her after all.

She began to move each muscle one by one, wincing at the pain, but discovering no broken bones. There were bruises and scrapes, but other than that, she was fine.

Not ready to stand up just yet, Flamepaw's eyes looked through the dark fog, and she let out a tiny mew, "Goldstar? Neko? Rosepettle? Snowheart? Are you there?"

Her eyes were adjusting to the fog now, and she suddenly could make out shapes nearby, some closer, some farther away. They were undoubtedly the shapes of cats, all of whom were sitting down in the same position as her.

"Yeah..." came a weak mew. Flamepaw turned, noticing Rosepettle only a fox-length from her. Her white pelt stood out well in the thick fog, and Flamepaw inched herself tpwards her, spotting Neko beside her, alive as well.

"Rosepettle is badly hurt," Neko told Flamepaw, licking Rosepettle's soft pelt.

Flamepaw slowly rose to her feet, shaking a little, and she hobbled over to them. Immediately, her paws touched a puddle of sticky blood, and she shrieked, looking to see Rosepettle's white pelt streaked with blood.

"Oh, why did Mothwing have to leave?!" Flamepaw exclaimed, rushing over to her friend. Rosepettle made no effort to move, and she miserably sat, licking at her wounds. From what Flamepaw could see, they were deep, but it seemed the bleeding had begun to stop.

"We don't know where Snowheart and her kit is," a new voice came.

Flamepaw spun around, relieved to see Goldstar padding behind her. She too looked unhurt, despite her wincing as she moved. Flamepaw looked at Neko, seeing he was untouched too. It looked as if Rosepettle was the only one severely injured.

"We're—we're alive!" Flamepaw shrieked, the realization suddenly hitting her. She bounced up and down, even if inappropriate at the time, laughing to herself. "We survived! We survived the fall!"

"Yes, but we might not all live to tell the tale," Rosepettle growled, yowling as Neko licked her wound.

Flamepaw turned to Goldstar, watching as the fog slowly eased up. It was still there, but it had become less dense, and she was able to see the cats now.

"Do we search for Snowheart and the kit? Rosepettle's injured..." Flamepaw spoke.

There was a silence, and Flamepaw watched as Neko laid down next to Rosepettle, fearlessly defending her if anything were to appear. It seemed he would not leave her side, and Flamepaw honestly didn't want to leave her side either.

Rosepettle looked shooken up, her eyes full of fear and terror. She sat motionless, her jaw quivering.

"I-I don't want to die!" she wailed, her voice shaking with her sobs. Neko frantically tried to calm her by licking her ear while Flamepaw rushed to her friend's side.

"You're not going to," Flamepaw assured Rosepettle, whose sobs echoed the canyon below.

"Sh, do you hear that?!" Goldstar snapped, trying to silence them.

"Hear what?" Flamepaw asked, turning to her leader. Her

heart suddenly pounded with fear. Could there be even more danger after leaping down a large cliff? And she hadn't even begun to think of how they'd get back to RiverClan now.

"It's Snowheart! I know it!" Rosepettle exclaimed, trying to stand up despite her wounds. She pushed down on her paws but could not lift herself.

"Stay down," Flamepaw hissed. "You'll only make your wounds worse. Do you want that happening?"

"No..." Rosepettle whimpered, her eyes focused on Goldstar. The golden she-cat had her nose lifted in the air and was glancing around. But Flamepaw quickly dismissed the issue. She had not heard a sound, and it seemed Goldstar had not heard anymore.

Rosepettle glanced up, looking at the rocky walls of the cliff. "Wow, we fell from up there?" she gasped.

Flamepaw nodded. "Hard to believe. StarClan really saved our pelts back there."

"What about Mothwing?" Neko asked, still glancing worriedly at Rosepettle's wounds. "Did she come?"

Flamepaw shook her head. "That's why I was so upset when I heard Rosepettle was injured. She decided to head back to camp. I hope she makes it back okay...It's hard to believe we all survived this fall. I was expecting to wake in StarClan and see all of you."

This caused Rosepettle to chuckle a little before the environment became eery and silent again. Even if they had survived, they knew nothing of the place they had landed or how to get back.

"We all thought the same," Goldstar purred, surprisingly happy for the situation. "I wonder if Snowheart's kit died..."

Flamepaw frowned. "Do we even know where Snowheart is?"

Goldstar shook her head. "I have no idea. But I don't know if we should look."

Before any cat could reply, there was the sound of heavy footsteps, and Flamepaw froze, a strong scent filling the air. Another cat was not too far by, but judging by the scent, she knew fr a fact it was not Snowheart. Perhaps it was her kit.

"What was that?" Flamepaw whispered, hearing the footsteps come closer. A yowl echoed from the cat's mouse, and Rosepettle let out a tiny shriek.

Rushing out of the fog was a large black and white cat,

shouting, "ZEBRAFUR!"

"Z-Zebrafur?" Flamepaw stuttered.

The large tom's eyes fell onto the group of cats, and she swore she could see disappointment flash in his green eyes. The tom looked down at Flamepaw, making her feel like a tiny rat that could be easily be squashed by his massive paws.

"Oh, you're not my mate," he said, looking at Flamepaw, then the others. "My mate...I'm afraid I've lost her."

"Oh," Flamepaw replied, suddenly feeling sorry for the tom. He seemed distraught to have lost her. "Well, what does she look like?"

But the tom did not reply. Instead, he turned to Goldstar. "Who are you?" he asked in a deep voice.

"My name is Goldstar," she said, stepping out in front of the others. If this tom were dangerous, it seemed Goldstar wanted to protect her clanmates. "These are my fellow clanmates—Flamepaw, Neko, and Rosepettle," she said, introducing them.

"Are you from any of the four clans? We're from RiverClan," Flamepaw told him. "Goldstar is our leader."

Goldstar shot her an icy look, and Flamepaw shrunk, realizing she shouldn't have released so much information that quickly.

"No, I live in dry lands where zebras and giraffes roam," the tom explained. "My name is Tornface."

"What weird words do you speak?" Goldstar asked, narrowing her eyes.

Flamepaw turned to the tom. "What's a zebra?" she asked, never hearing of the word before.

Tornface thought for a moment. "A zebra...is hard to explain," he decided. Flamepaw frowned, wishing to hear more of where the tom came from.

"Do you know how to get out of here?" Neko wondered.

"Yes," he replied.

"How?" Flamepaw asked.

"This way," Tornface spoke, beginning to walk towards the east. Neko helped Rosepettle up, letting her lean against him as they slowly followed Tornface. Flamepaw stood next to Goldstar, looking back often to see Neko and Rosepettle were still following.

Despite Rosepettle's condition, she seemed to follow well, yet she still seemed tired and in need of rest.

They walked through the fog, the only sound in the canyon a light wind, which swirled around Flamepaw's fur with every motion.

Suddenly, a faint sound of mewling came, and Neko pricked his ears. "That sounded like a kit."

"CLAWKIT!" Tornface shrieked, his eyes widening. He suddenly ran ahead of the others, leaving them in the dust.

"Wait! Who's Clawkit?!" Flamepaw shouted, chasing after the tom. The others followed behind quickly, Neko and Rosepettle working hard to catch up with the others.

Flamepaw watched as Tornface came to a halt by two slanted rocks that seemed to create a small den inside. As Flamepaw neared, the noticed a small scrap of brown fur and stopped in her tracks.

Neko and Rosepettle were panting heavily as they approached, but as they stopped, Rosepettle froze.

"Is that a kit?!"

"What's a kit doing out here?" Flamepaw growled at Tornface. At first, she believed it to be Snowheart's kit, but judging by Goldstar's story, the kit was far too young to be Runningkit.

Clawkit mewled as Tornface neared him.

"I don't know!" Tornface exclaimed, licking the kit affectionately. "He's my son...I don't know how he got here!"

"He's yours?" Flamepaw asked.

Tornface nodded, picking the young kit up by the scruff. "I don't know how he got here," he explained, simply blown away.

"Poor thing," Rosepettle whimpered, glancing at the frightened kit.

"Maybe he fell," Neko suggested.

"Can you show us out of here?" Goldstar growled, beginning to get impatient.

"Perhaps it's best we make camp for the night," Tornface decided. "I know of some prey nearby, and I need someone to watch Clawkit."

"Rosepettle needs rest," Neko agreed.

"Then we'll make camp," Flamepaw decided.

Goldstar didn't seem to agree, judging by her facial expression, but she did not deny this. They all laid down, and Tornface set Clawkit down. The tom began to pad around happily, glancing around at the new cats.

"He's so adorable!" Rosepettle shrieked, as if she'd forgotten how much pain she was still in.

Flamepaw smiled at the tom, watching his green eyes light up as they fell on Flamepaw. The tiny kit let out a large yawn and padded happily towards Flamepaw, curling up by her soft ginger fur.

"He likes you," Tornface purred.

"Yeah," Flamepaw agreed, smiling at the sleeping kit. Tired herself, she laid down her head and shut her eyes, falling into a dreamless slumber.

Chapter 23

In the morning, Flamepaw was awoken by Clawkit stretching his body against her leg. She looked down at the young kit, smiling as his eyes opened and focused on hers. She expected him to flee in fear when he saw her, but he was relaxed, and his eyes reflected hers.

"Good morning," she whispered to Clawkit.

The tom smiled back at her and nudged against her leg. From nearby, Flamepaw heard Tornface speak.

"He likes you," he told her.

Flamepaw turned, seeing the tom was already up. Three dead rabbits lay beside him, one already partially eaten. He must've been up hunting early.

Flamepaw stood up slowly, Clawkit following her as she padded over to Tornface. Flamepaw sat down next to Tornface, looking at the delicious dead rabbits.

"Can I have one?" she asked.

"Have the rest of mine," Tornface offered, shoving her his half-eaten rabbit. "There's a lot of cats traveling with us. It was hard just to find three rabbits."

Flamepaw nodded, beginning to bite into Tornface's discarded prey. Her stomach immediately felt better, no longer stinging from the sensation of hunger. Flamepaw glanced around the canyon they had landed in, seeing nothing but dirt and dead weeds covering the floor.

"I'm surprised anything can survive down here," she admitted.

Tornface nodded. "Thankfully the rabbits survive."

Flamepaw nodded, chewing her meat slowly. She watched Clawkit rub against his father, purring.

"Does he speak?" she asked.

Tornface nodded. "Yes, he does. Don't you, Clawkit?" he asked, glancing at the tom.

Clawkit nodded.

"He's shy," Tornface admitted, glancing at the brown tabby tom. "I was surprised he took a liking to you. He doesn't like new

cats."

"He wasn't traveling with you?" Flamepaw asked.

Tornface shook his head. "I lost my mate and three kits. We were separated not too long ago. That's who I was looking for when I found all of you. It's a miracle I found Clawkit. I don't even know how he made it down here."

Clawkit glanced up at his father, quiet.

"Whatever it was, it must've been a lot," Tornface sighed.

Behind her, Flamepaw could hear Rosepettle let out a large yawn. She spun around, relieved to see the she-cat's wounds were no longer bleeding; however, they still were not healing quickly.

"Is it morning?" Rosepettle asked in a tired voice.

Beside her, Goldstar and Neko both stirred, Neko taking his sweet time to open his eyes while Goldstar stood up the moment she woke up.

"Are we ready to go?" she asked Tornface, determined.

"Why not eat first?" he suggested, shoving the rabbits towards the three cats.

"Rosepettle needs to eat," Neko explained. "She needs to keep her strength up."

Flamepaw nodded. "If only there were herbs nearby..."

"I saw some yellow flowers growing not too far from here," Tornface explained.

"Marigold!" Flamepaw gasped. "StarClan has answered our prayers."

Tornface glanced at her, confused. "I'm guessing it's valuable then?"

Flamepaw nodded. "My best friend is a medicine cat. That's one of the few herbs she taught me. Where is it?"

"I can lead you," Tornface offered.

Flamepaw turned to Goldstar and the others. "I'll be back," she assured them.

"Don't stray too far," Goldstar warned. "Something tells me this place isn't as safe as it seems."

"We won't go far," Tornface assured her. "Clawkit, you stay with them."

Clawkit pouted, padding over to Flamepaw's side. She smiled at the kit.

"Stop bothering her," Tornface told Clawkit.

"It's fine," Flamepaw assured Tornface. "Clawkit can come

with us."

"Well, all right," Tornface decided, beginning to pad north. Flamepaw followed him, allowing Clawkit to climb onto her back. She felt the tom grasp onto her fur, and she smiled as she heard him laugh as she trotted along.

Tornface glanced up at his son and smiled, and together they disappeared into a swarm of dust. Flamepaw coughed, struggling to see through the dust storm.

"Dust storms are frequent down here," Tornface explained, coughing. Clawkit had buried his head in Flamepaw's fur, whimpering as dust rushed past them.

"Where are the flowers?" Flamepaw asked.

"This way," Tornface shouted, turning to the right. Thankfully, the dust began to settle at this time, and Flamepaw began to see again. She padded next to him, turning her head to check if Clawkit was okay. He glanced back at her, answering her question.

As they walked, Flamepaw glanced around the strange environment, admiring the odd beauty of the clay-colored cliffs and brown weeds that clung to its sides. Glancing ahead, she saw the tiniest bit of yellow color. She was surprised to see how greatly it contrasted from the rest of the environment.

"Over there," Tornface told her, pointing to the clump of marigold that grew on the floor. Excited, Flamepaw rushed past him, listening to Clawkit's squeals as she sprinted towards where the herbs grew. She crouched down and let Clawkit climb down her back, laughing to herself as he spun around, dizzy from the fast-paced ride.

"Is this what you were looking for?" Tornface asked, pointing his dark tail towards the clump of flowers.

Flamepaw crouched down, immediately recognizing the flower.

"Yes. This will be perfect for Rosepettle's wounds. Help me pick some," she said.

Tornface nodded, and together, they grabbed bunches of flowers, bundling them up in a stray leaf from a bush nearby. Both Tornface and Flamepaw carried a sack in their mouth, and soon, they were on their way back, Clawkit riding on Flamepaw's back once again.

Carefully retracting their steps, Flamepaw found Goldstar,

Rosepettle, and Neko all unharmed where they had left them. It seemed they had even finished breakfast as well and were waiting impatiently for their return.

"Did you find marigold?!" Rosepettle gasped, her eyes widening. She struggled to her feet, but Neko kept her down.

"Do you want the wound to get worse?" he growled.

"Let's apply the marigold and get out of here," Goldstar grumbled. Flamepaw wondered why she was so suspicious of this place, but she shrugged and nodded, crouching down to let Clawkit off her back. She then padded over to Rosepettle, chewing the roots of the flower and applying them to the white she-cat's wounds.

Rosepettle winced, sighing in relief when Flamepaw moved the substance away. She thanked Flamepaw, then stood up slowly, standing firmly on her feet.

"I'm good," she told Neko, who frantically stood on her side, waiting to catch her if she fell.

"Are you ready to continue on then?" Tornface asked.

Goldstar nodded. "Yes. Please lead us."

Tornface nodded, beginning to lead the group through the unknown land. Clawkit trotted alongside the cats happily, causing smiles from both Flamepaw and Rosepettle. Goldstar, however, seem unfazed by the kit's happy attitude. She continued along sternly, padding through the canyon quickly and quietly.

Flamepaw trotted alongside Goldstar in silence, glancing up at the she-cat. She seemed so motivated to make it through here. She really did have the characteristics of a leader.

"Everything okay?" Flamepaw asked Goldstar.

Goldstar nodded. "I just want to get out of here. This place gives me creeps."

Flamepaw shrugged. "It's unfamiliar, but I suppose it's okay."

"Still," Goldstar sighed. "I just want to get all my clanmates back safely. We still need to find Snowheart. I hope Mothwing is able to explain everything back at home."

"May StarClan grant her safety coming home," Flamepaw said.

Goldstar nodded. "And still, Korosu is out there. I'm frightened, Flamepaw, and I can normally hide it well."

Flamepaw was surprised. She'd always thought of the leader as so strong, so courageous, so unafraid of whatever came her way.

But then she remembered why Goldstar had set off in the first place —to find new members. She had already been frightened before the journey.

"We'll get through this," Flamepaw told Goldstar. "RiverClan will be fine when we return."

Goldstar nodded, glancing down at Clawkit who skipped along by her feet. And for once, Flamepaw saw Goldstar's face lift into a slight smile. It seemed the young kit had distracted her from the issues at hand.

Flamepaw turned around, relieved to see Neko and Rosepettle not far behind, each of them walking well. Rosepettle trotted along as if her wounds did not bug her at all. Flamepaw was relieved to see the marigold had done its job.

Clawkit rushed ahead towards his father, mewing with delight. Tornface smiled, picking the tom up by the scruff. Suddenly, he dropped Clawkit and came to a halt. The tom fell to the ground with a thud, mewling in anger.

"What's going on?" Flamepaw asked. She gasped, coming to a halt. A swarm of dust had just passed by, and in its trace, it had left a sly looking Javanese cat. Flamepaw knew who it was immediately.

"Sorry," she laughed, swooping her feathery tail as she moved slyly. "I didn't mean to spoil your party," she said, grinning maliciously.

Korosu, Flamepaw thought.

Chapter 24

Flamepaw stood, scared stiff. Her eyes were fixed on the malicious figure of the white she-cat. Just by staring into the she-cat's deadly red eyes, she felt a sense of fear. Never in her life had she feared a cat so much.

"Who-who are you?" the tiny tabby stammered, though she knew very well this was Korosu, the evil cat they had spoken of earlier.

Korosu turned, her eyes fixed on Flamepaw. She grinned maliciously and slowly came towards Flamepaw in a smooth motion. Flamepaw wanted to run, but her legs remained frozen, and she braced herself as the she-cat came nearer and curled her feathery tail around Flamepaw's waste.

Flamepaw shuddered at Korosu's touch, then glanced into her bright red eyes that seemed to stick out so much from her pale fur. Looking into them, she noticed they were the color of blood.

"Your worst nightmare," Korosu whispered quietly into Flamepaw's ear.

Suddenly, a flash came and broke Flamepaw away from reality. She found herself standing in darkness, jumping as a high-pitched screams came from the darkness. More screams followed—screams of pain, torture, abandonment. And then with a flash of lightning, Flamepaw could see a small cat laying on a pile of rocks, blood splattered over the boulders. Another flash came, and Flamepaw found herself back with the others, glancing into Korosu's devilish eyes once again.

"KOROSU!" Goldstar hissed at last, her claws unsheathing.

Adrenaline suddenly surged within Flamepaw, and she stupidly lashed at the she-cat, throwing herself on top of her. Korosu, not expecting this, was stunned for a moment as Flamepaw's body collided with her, but after a fierce snarl and swipe of claws, Flamepaw was pushed off the she-cat and sat on the ground, licking at the stinging wounds that had been left from Korosu's claw marks.

Coming towards the other cats now, Goldstar let out a fierce hiss, and Neko moved in front of Rosepettle protectively, snarling at

Korosu.

"What do you want from us?!" Goldstar shouted, her sharp white teeth glowing fiercely.

Korosu laughed quietly to herself and sat down, licking one of her delicate paws. "It's quite simple, darling. I want the kit," she said, turning her gaze now to Clawkit.

The small kit whimpered and hid behind his father. Flamepaw growled at Korosu, wondering why she would ever require Clawkit in the first place.

"Scary," Clawkit mewed quietly behind Tornface's muscular leg.

Neko's eyes suddenly widened, as if he were just not realizing what was going on. "Wait, Korosu. Is that you?!"

Flamepaw felt her heart leap. How would Neko recognize this evil she-cat? Neko was such a sweet and kind kittypet. How had he ever met this evil she-cat before?

Rosepettle tilted her head, beginning to step away from Neko. "You know her?"

Flamepaw found the strength to stand up now, and she faced Neko, feeling a sense of hurt and betrayal. "You know her, Neko?"

Neko nodded, gulping. "She is...my sister," he announced, dropping his head in shame. Goldstar widened her eyes, and Rosepettle now moved fully away from Neko. His trust had been immediately lost.

Flamepaw, however, stood near Neko, seeing how disappointed he looked. "But how, Neko? You-you're not like her at all!" she stammered in surprise.

Korosu pushed past Flamepaw and stood by Neko, grinning. "Hello, brother. Long time no see," she purred.

"What are you doing?!" Neko hissed at her. Rosepettle stepped out behind Neko now, gazing at Korosu angrily.

"Why, Neko," Korosu purred, pointing the tip of her white tail at Rosepettle. "Is she special to you?"

Neko curled his lip, unable to hide his emotions. "You wouldn't dare," he muttered, taking a step forward and letting out a low growl. Flamepaw stood to the side, her heart racing with each movement that took place.

With no time left to wait, Goldstar sprung at Korosu with fury. Unfortunately for her, it seemed Korosu had expected this, and

she tossed the golden she-cat into the rock wall. Furious, Flamepaw leapt at Korosu with her claws unsheathed and managed to swipe at her once.

Angry, Korosu grabbed Flamepaw by the scruff and tossed her at the weakened Goldstar, who was just beginning to stand up. Flamepaw collided with her leader and groaned, rubbing her sore muscles.

"I have no time to mess with kits," she growled at Flamepaw.

Flamepaw felt herself rising with anger, but she remained quiet.

Tornface hissed with Clawkit mewling behind him. Quickly, Korosu weaved in between Tornface's legs and grabbed the small kit, grinning in satisfaction. Neko hissed and grabbed for Clawkit, rescuing him from Korosu's grasp. Rosepettle yowled in triumph and jumped on the she-cat's back, only to be pinned down moments later by Korosu.

Korosu held her firmly in place, her unsheathed claws dangling inches from Rosepettle's throat. "Give me the kit and she will not be harmed," she warned.

Without thinking, Flamepaw charged at Korosu and knocked her aside, allowing Rosepettle to be free from Korosu's grasp.

"RUN!" Flamepaw shouted to Rosepettle, watching as she made a break for it. Korosu stood up quickly and raced to Flamepaw's side.

"Now, dear, that's not the way to do it," Korosu called. Before Flamepaw could react, the she-cat had chomped down on Flamepaw's ear, blood splattering across Flamepaw's face. The young apprentice yowled in pain, ignoring the tears beginning to form in her eyes.

Rosepettle widened her eyes as Neko shouted, "Korosu, stop that!"

Korosu bit down harder, causing Flamepaw to scream in pain. "DO SOMETHING!" she shouted desperately, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Neko cautiously walked forward with Clawkit, each step seeming like it was taking a year to complete.

Tornface's eyes widened as he saw this, and he began to shout, "NEKO, DON'T DO IT!" Flamepaw gulped, not wanting

anything to happen to Clawkit, and she kept her mouth shut. Korosu released Flamepaw's ear but still held her firmly against her, this time aiming her claws at Flamepaw's throat.

Flamepaw shut her eyes, imagining that this was how she'd meet her end. She would never see RiverClan again, her parents, Mothwing. She had failed, and she'd end up in StarClan much too soon.

"NO!" Clawkit mewed, breaking free from Neko's grasp. Seeing the young kit rushing towards her, Flamepaw felt a sense of hope and love. He charged at Korosu and knocked her over surprisingly.

Flamepaw broke free, ignoring the stinging pain on her ear. Before she could thank Clawkit, Korosu had sprung up and had bashed Clawkit, sending him flying into a rock wall. The kit yelped and slid down onto a pile of rocks, motionless.

"HOW DARE YOU!" Flamepaw hissed, knocking Korosu aside. She ran to the collapsed kit in a frantic hurry, praying to StarClan he was okay.

"Clawkit, Clawkit!" she shouted, approaching his limp body. Rosepettle followed quickly behind, putting her ear to the collapsed tom's chest. Flamepaw's heart sunk as tears gathered in Rosepettle's eyes.

"He...he's gone to StarClan," she announced.

It was like experiencing Daisyflower's death all over again. Why did a cat always have to die for her, especially one so young?!

"NO!" Flamepaw yowled, fury rising in her. She rushed towards Korosu and sprang at her, knocking her aside with her claws. She bit down on the she-cat's ear, feeling Korosu struggle beneath her.

"HOW DO YOU LIKE MY NOW?!" Flamepaw spat, anger taking over her entire body. She would rip the she-cat apart, shredding her to pieces. For Clawkit.

Suddenly, Flamepaw felt something whip her off. Korosu sprang free, and Flamepaw glanced up to see a muscular tom standing over her, growling. Three more followed behind—another muscular and older cat, and two were kits, no older than Clawkit, but they looked fierce.

Tornface suddenly raced over to the kits frantically. "LEOPARDKIT! TIGERKIT! I'M SO GLAD I FOUND YOU!" he exclaimed excitedly, glancing at the two kits.

Leopardkit, a spotted she-cat, glanced at Tornface disgustedly. "Who are you?" she asked, growling.

"Who are they?" Flamepaw asked Tornface, panting heavily.

A black tabby with white stripes stepped forward, and Flamepaw recognized him as the tom who knocked her off. "I'm Crowkit," he announced. Following behind was a gray she-cat, who stood proudly beside the others. "I'm Lightkit."

A tortoiseshell she-cat, perhaps around Goldstar's age, came forward. "I'm Speckledkit," she said.

Flamepaw looked oddly at these large cats, wondering why such old cats that were well the age of a senior warrior still referred to themselves as kits.

Goldstar nearly fainted when seeing Speckledkit. "Y-You're Mossystar's kit!" she gasped.

"I'm Leopardkit," the spotted kit announced. Her brother, a dark brown tabby tom who looked similar to Tornface, spoke beside her. "And I'm Tigerkit." They were the youngest there and the only kits.

Speckledkit narrowed her eyes at Goldstar. "Mossystar?" she asked, apparently never hearing of the name before.

Goldstar looked surprised. "She was your mother! She was the leader of RiverClan before Salmonstar and me!"

Speckledkit only gazed at her oddly, feeling more relaxed as Korosu placed her tail on the spotted cat's shoulder.

"You can't believe that, can you?" Goldstar sighed.

Speckledkit shook her head and unsheathed her claws, ready to attack.

"Please, we mean no harm!" Flamepaw begged.

"OF COURSE YOU MEAN HARM IF YOU WERE TRYING TO ATTACK OUR MOTHER!" Crowkit hissed angrily.

The others nodded in agreement, and for a moment, Flamepaw wondered if just speaking to them would put off the attack. Neko stepped forward now, gazing at Korosu curiously. "They can't all be your kits," he said.

"How is it possible?" Flamepaw whispered. Hadn't Goldstar just said Speckledkit was Mossystar's kit? Some of these cats looked closer to Korosu's age.

All of the sudden, a white she-cat burst through the crowd. Immediately, Flamepaw recognized her as Snowheart, coming to save the day. She pinned Korosu and growled angrily.

"How did you get out?" Korosu whispered.

"Does this answer your question?" Snowheart asked, vanishing from view and then reappearing next to the white tom that had come with her. Flamepaw recognized him as Runningkit.

The whole crowd was in shock, not knowing of Snowheart's apparent powers.

Korosu flicked her ears and the cats began to attack. Yowling, Flamepaw fiercely battled the gray she-cat, trying her best not to be ripped to shreds.

Goldstar, however, was wandering aimlessly through the fighting, wailing, "DON'T HURT THEM! ONE IS MOSSYSTAR'S KIT! AND THE REST WERE PROBABLY TRICKED INTO BELIEVING KOROSU AS THEIR MOTHER!"

You've got to let go of that, Flamepaw thought, clawing at Lightkit's leg. *They work for Korosu now.*

Flamepaw saw Leopardkit fighting alongside her brother, and even though they were kits, they could fight as well as Flamepaw. Plus, it seemed no cat could intentionally hurt them with them being young kits.

Cats were fighting left and right, and Flamepaw was deep into a battle with Lightkit when a gray tabby she-cat ran into the crowd.

"WHERE ARE MY KITS?! LEOPARDKIT! TIGERKIT!" she called.

Flamepaw froze, watching as Lightkit snarled, "They aren't your kits."

Chapter 25

Flamepaw stood nervously, avoiding unsheathed claws as cats pushed past her, yowling. She watched as Snowheart and Runningkit collapsed, both of them exhausted. Flamepaw wondered what they'd been through before they had even started fighting in this battle.

"Why is this happening?!" Neko exclaimed, rushing over towards Korosu.

With one flick of her tail, the fighting ceased, and Korosu faced her brother, snarling viciously at him.

"I'm not what I used to be, brother," she growled, her sharp white teeth even brighter than her silky pelt.

Flamepaw stepped back, frightened by the she-cat. She glanced back over at the striped she-cat that had run over into the mess. She looked as confused as the others.

Goldstar quickly made her way to Snowheart and Runningkit in a panicked hurry.

"Are you okay?" she asked them, helping them come back up to their feet.

Flamepaw suddenly felt another cat by her side. She turned, seeing Rosepettle and Neko standing near her. Their presence brought her a sense of protection, almost.

"You okay?" Rosepettle whispered.

Flamepaw nodded, glancing down at the few scratches on parts of her body. Other than that, she remained in adequate shape.

"I'm okay," Snowheart grumbled, standing up now.

Goldstar glanced down, her eyes widening. "What in StarClan happened to your leg?!"

At this remark, Flamepaw turned and noticed a long, deep cut running down Snowheart's leg, the redness of the blood soaking into Snowheart's pure white pelt.

Before Snowheart could reply, the small brown kit, Tigerkit, limped over to the striped she-cat. Flamepaw was surprised to see him injured, but upon seeing Leopardkit growling, she realized the two had been in a battle.

The striped she-cat was terrified by the blood spewing out

of the tom's shoulder, and she immediately began to lick the wound, tears springing from her eyes.

Tornface ran over to the kit, exclaiming, "TIGERKIT!"

Tigerkit glanced up, shouting, "DADDY!" He ran towards his father and buried his face into his father's furry chest. Flamepaw felt her heart swelling.

Leopardkit leapt over them curiously, and for a moment, Flamepaw feared she would attack the small family. But instead, the striped she-cat only glanced up tearfully, asking "Why?"

"Are you their mother?" Flamepaw asked. "Are you Zebrafur?" She recalled the name from earlier when Tornface had mentioned losing his mate.

The striped she-cat nodded. "I am."

Tigerkit turned to Leopardkit, hissing. "Zebrafur and Tornface are my mother and father, and they don't treat me like foxdung!"

Leopardkit shrunk back, but when standing tall again, she looked more relaxed and almost apologetic for what she'd done.

"Where'd you learn that language?!" Tornface gasped.

Leopardkit laughed, and Flamepaw was surprised these kits could go from vicious to loving so fast.

"You're a mousebrain," she said, teasing her brother.

Flamepaw smiled at them, glad they had discovered the truth about their parents. If Korosu were to continue manipulating them...

"KOROSU!" Rosepettle spat as soon as Flamepaw's thoughts finished.

Flamepaw turned, noticing that Korosu and the rest of the "kits" had vanished, leaving only them and Tornface's family behind.

"Mouse-dung!" Flamepaw spat, not realizing the she-cat could've gotten away so easily while they were distracted.

As soon as the words echoed her mouth, there was a large rumble, and Neko let out a yowl as rocks tumbled down from the walls of the canyon. Before Flamepaw could react, a cloud of dust and yowling cats had blinded her view. She shrunk down, waiting for a rock to crush her, but when silence came, she remained unhurt.

Coughing loudly, she began to see through the dust, gasping in surprise when she found that the place Snowheart, Runningkit,

and Rosepettle had stood were covered in rocks.

"ROSEPETTLE!" Neko screeched. He frantically paced back and forth by the pile of heavy rocks, pressing his nose up to any opening he could find. "Please, say something."

Flamepaw frowned, watching as the other cats slowly realized what had happened. They couldn't have all died so easily. After fighting Korosu and her army, how could they have been crushed by a mere pile of rocks?

She approached the pile, Goldstar, Tornface, Zebrafur, and Tigerkit following behind. Leopardkit stayed behind, looking confused. "Oh no," she murmured quietly, sorrowful from the event.

Neko was groaning and placing his head against a rock, tears dripping down his cheeks. Flamepaw knew that hope was not lost. They could very well be alive.

While the cats kept their silence, Flamepaw began using her paws to scoop the rocks away. The others glanced at her, then shrugged, beginning to do the same. Soon, all the cats had felt the same sense of hope as Flamepaw, and they were violently digging their paws in between rocks and breaking them free.

"This isn't too hard," Flamepaw admitted.

Tigerkit, too tiny to move any rocks, wailed, "THIS IS REALLY HAR—" His sentence was cut short by the sound of more rocks tumbling down.

Squealing, Flamepaw and the others leapt aside, but Tigerkit remained, frozen as rocks tumbled towards him. Flamepaw watched the kit close his eyes as the rocks approached him, when suddenly a flash of spotted fur came by and pushed Tigerkit aside. The brown kit tumbled down the pile of rocks, landing hard, yet still unhurt, on the ground below.

As the rocks settled, Flamepaw gasped in surprise to see Leopardkit's body underneath a rock, blood spilling out from beneath it.

I shouldn't have started digging. It wouldn't have continued to fall, was all Flamepaw could think, now feeling the burden of yet another death.

Tigerkit rose warily, glancing around to find out what had happened. At the sight of his sister, he gasped.

Zebrafur pushed her way towards her daughter, wailing horrifically. With all her might, Flamepaw was surprised to see her push the rock off of Leopardkit, revealing the limp and bloody body

of her daughter.

"MY KIT!" she wailed hysterically.

Flamepaw glanced down, feeling once again to blame.

Tornface stood beside her, holding back tears as Zebrafur wailed into his coat. Tigerkit stood in a mourning manner beside them, whispering, "She saved my life."

"Oh, but Clawkit is still safe at home, isn't he?" Zebrafur asked Tornface through tears.

Flamepaw felt her heart breaking. "He-he died," was all she could say.

Zebrafur's tears ceased, and she stood, absolutely speechless. "Two of my kits are dead," she murmured, all light and happiness fading from her eyes.

Flamepaw took a step forward in attempt to comfort her, but she knew their was nothing to do to comfort a mother who had lost two kits.

Suddenly, another rumble of rocks came, and Flamepaw gasped as Runningkit and Rosepettle burst out of the rocks. The rocks crumbled and stopped, and Goldstar glanced around frantically.

"Where's Snowheart?!"

Runningkit looked down, dust from the boulders coating his fur. "She...didn't make it in time."

Rosepettle stood, her eyes foggy with tears. At the sight of Neko though, her eyes lit up, and the two ran towards each other, embracing each other.

"Thank StarClan you're okay," Rosepettle murmured, nuzzling him.

Runningkit sighed, still noticing the despair in the others' eyes. "The problem is, we don't know if she's okay. She survived the first time though."

"Let's dig again then!" Goldstar declared.

No cat argued, and Flamepaw followed them to the rock pile once again, digging her paws into the pile of rocks, this time hoping to find Snowheart alive and not her limp and bloody body.

The cats dug for several minutes until Tigerkit yowled, "GUYS! I FOUND HER! SHE'S ALIVE!"

Immediately, they rushed towards the small brown kit. Snowheart emerged from the rubble, her coat also brown from the dust of the rocks. She looked exhausted.

Goldstar sniffed her curiously, glancing at her with suspicion. Did she suspect Snowheart's return to be an effect of Snowheart's powers.

"Thank goodness you're all right," Tigerkit sighed in relief.

"Are you hurt, Snowheart?" Flamepaw asked, still noticing the cut on her leg.

"I'm fine," Snowheart assured them. "I'll need some cobwebs and probably some marigold, but I should be okay."

"If only we had Mothwing," Goldstar sighed.

"I think we should rest for the night," Tornface decided.

Flamepaw nodded, exhausted from the trauma she'd received in the last twenty-four hours. As cats began to settle down away from the rock pile, Flamepaw found herself failing to fall asleep. All she could see were Daisyflower, Clawkit, and Leopardkit's death replaying in her mind, and she felt like she was to blame for all of it.

Sighing, she closed her eyes, murmuring, "I want to go home."

Chapter 26

Flamepaw awoke the following morning, at first forgetting all about what had happened the past day. Then, she saw the curled body of Tigerkit sleeping soundly next to his mother, and she was filled again with guilt as she thought of Clawkit and Leopardkit, two kits she could not save.

Despite her disinterest in food, her stomach was growling quite loudly, and she noticed that Tornface was walking towards the group of cats with three large rabbits for them to share. She licked her lips, rising to greet him.

Tornface, though he did not look as somber as Zebrafur, still looked down sadly as he padded towards them. Flamepaw, realizing this, paused as she approached him, then sat back down.

"Good morning," she spoke quietly, turning to see the others still sleeping soundly.

"Good morning," Tornface sighed. "I caught us breakfast."

"That was very kind of you," Flamepaw responded, biting into a rabbit he pushed towards her. Zebrafur awoke moments later, and soon, Tornface was sharing a morning meal with his family.

Flamepaw looked down sadly, feeling as if the trouble they were going through was entirely her fault. She shouldn't have suggested digging those rocks. But then again, how would have the others escaped?

Flamepaw sighed and left the rest of her rabbit for some other cat to enjoy. As Goldstar and the others began to rouse, Flamepaw padded over to Tornface and Zebrafur.

"I-I wanted to apologize for yesterday," she spoke, choking back tears. Her eyes stung from fresh tears as she once again thought of the two loving kits. "It-it was never my intention for any of this to happen."

"Don't blame yourself," Zebrafur sniffed. "Tigerkit is still alive and well."

"B-But Clawkit...did Tornface tell you?" Flamepaw choked.

"Clawkit's death was not your fault," Tornface responded solemnly. "Quit blaming yourself. You're only a young apprentice. This must be hard on you."

Flamepaw nodded, holding her tears back as she noticed Goldstar looking over at her with curiosity. She couldn't show weakness in front of her own leader.

"It's been hard," Flamepaw admitted.

She glanced back over at the others, watching Rosepettle and Neko share the rest of her rabbit while Runningkit, Snowheart, and Goldstar nibbled on the other. Flamepaw sighed and turned back around, hunching her shoulders sadly. She wanted nothing more than to return home. The emotional toll of the quest was too much to handle.

But Gingerkit told me I had to protect Goldstar, and Korosu is still a threat, Flamepaw reminded herself.

"Hey, who wants to get out of this place?!" Snowheart offered.

"We'd love to, but there's no way!" Rosepettle exclaimed. "It'll take days."

Tornface was about to speak when Snowheart grinned to herself. She barely seemed to be in pain anymore, and Flamepaw noticed her leg wound was nearly gone. How could she heal so fast?

"That's what you think," she purred.

And then, to Flamepaw's surprise, white feathery wings arose from Snowheart's shoulders, stretching into the sky.

"WHAT IN STARCLAN'S NAME ARE YOU?!" Zebrafur screeched, amazed.

Flamepaw's eyes widened with mystery. If only she'd known Snowheart had possessed all these amazing powers earlier. She'd never really thought of the she-cat so much before the quest.

Snowheart smiled, amused by Zebrafur's shock. "I was given magical powers by StarClan. I promise they're not evil. You shouldn't have to be scared."

Tornface eyed Snowheart with suspicion, then approached her. "You can take us out of here?"

"I think so," Snowheart nodded, glancing at her long wings. "We'll have to hold on tight though. Flamepaw, climb on my back. I'll hold Tigerkit by the scruff. The others can grab onto my legs."

Not so sure about this idea, Flamepaw hesitantly climbed onto the she-cat's back and dug her claws into Snowheart's fur, grasping tightly onto the she-cat.

The others obeyed Snowheart's olders and held on tight. Flamepaw laughed to herself as she saw Zebrafur wincing.

"Off we go!" Snowheart shouted.

In one swift motion, her wings propelled them through the air. Flamepaw was amazed, watching as the wind soared past her. She held on tighter, listening to the shrieks of the cats holding onto Snowheart below.

In a matter of minutes, they were flying away from the canyon and back towards the forest where they had left. Flamepaw watched as they dissolved into a thick cloud of fog, and when they broke free, she found herself back at the cliff at the edge of the woods.

Snowheart slowly landed, her paws touching the cliff lightly. She herself looked exhausted as she panted heavily.

Flamepaw climbed off the she-cat's back, simply amazed. The others were still recovering from the journey up, looking as if they were going to be sick.

"That was amazing!" both Flamepaw and Tigerkit chimed in unison.

Snowheart, looking tired, smiled weakly. "Thank you," she spoke as her wings retracted, making it seem as if she had never had them in the first place. "But it's taken up a lot of my energy."

"Are you still able to walk?" Goldstar asked, rising to her feet. "It's time we make our way back."

Snowheart tested out her paws, then nodded.

Flamepaw, happy to be returning, began to trot back into the woods with the group of cats. Flamepaw was thrilled to be away from the terrible canyon, and all she hoped now was that StarClan granted them a safe trip back, with no unexpected visits from Korosu...

As she padded through the woods, however, an unfamiliar scent caught her nose. At first, she thought nothing of it, suspecting it to be the wind bringing scents nearby. As she glanced around the forest, admiring the tall pine trees and dense bushes, she realized this forest was quite unfamiliar and most likely had a different scent.

At the sound of a bush rustling, however, she froze, turning to face the bush where the noise had come from.

"Something wrong?" Rosepettle asked, noticing Flamepaw had stopped in her tracks.

"I-I thought I heard something," Flamepaw admitted, continuing to walk along. The sound came again though from a

nearer set of bushes, and she feared they were being followed.

"I-I think someone's there," Flamepaw whispered to Rosepettle.

Rosepettle froze, her eyes widening. "You don't think it could be—"

Flamepaw gulped, her eyes wide with fear. She shrugged, praying it would not be Korosu. Before any cat had time to warn the others, a cat burst out of the bushes in a hurry. Flamepaw shrieked, at first believing it to be Korosu, but then, she realized this cat certainly was not the evil she-cat.

This cat was a dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes. He had cuts and scratches all over his body, and his eyes were red as if he had not slept in days. He was young, an apprentice, Flamepaw guessed. He saw the cats and froze, panting heavily.

"S-Sorry," he stammered. "I didn't mean to frighten anyone."

"Who are you?" Flamepaw wondered, not seeing the tom as a threat.

"Barkpaw," he replied.

Tigerkit curiously approached the tom and began to sniff his leg. Then, he turned back to his mother, saying, "Hey, Mom! Come check this cat out!"

The others soon turned around and approached Barkpaw, leaving the tom to feel awkward as he became surrounded by the group of cats.

"I'm Flamepaw," Flamepaw introduced herself. "Most of us are from RiverClan, and we're on our way back there." Suddenly, an idea hit her. "Hey, want to join?"

"But you didn't ask Goldstar's permission!" Rosepettle exclaimed.

Goldstar walked up to Barkpaw. "What clan are you from?" she growled. "You're definitely not one of RiverClan. Are you ThunderClan, WindClan, or ShadowClan?"

"N-none," Barkpaw stammered, intimidated by the she-cat. "I-I come from LightningClan. We're a very small clan, and just recently, our clan was overrun by wild dogs. They were attacking my sisters, so I created a diversion and led them away. But when I came back, the camp was deserted, and I had no idea where everyone went. The place was coated in blood. I-I think they're dead," he admitted, glancing down. He still looked as if he were shocked by the sights he had seen.

It was then Flamepaw realized this tom was not so different from her. He had also seen terrible sights that would be implanted in his brain forever.

"Poor thing," Flamepaw sighed.

"But if you were offering me clan membership, I'd love to join," Barkpaw exclaimed. "I've been looking for cats for days. Living out here in the woods is not the life for me. I belong to a clan."

Goldstar eyed the dark-furred tom, unsure if she trusted him. "Perhaps you can stay for awhile. Flamepaw, you can bring him up to speed about clan business."

"Oh, okay," Flamepaw agreed, accepting her position.

Goldstar then turned away, sweeping her tail.

Tornface cleared his throat, stepping forward. "Excuse me, Goldstar, I don't mean to interrupt, but Zebrafur and I have decided that we'll be departing tomorrow."

"What?" Neko asked, surprised. "You're leaving?"

Zebrafur nodded. "Afraid so. We are not clan cats, and we instead wish to return home. We have come a long way from it, and I want to raise my only living son in the right environment. Hopefully you are not offended."

Flamepaw tried to find any emotion in Goldstar's eyes, but she could not.

Goldstar only nodded. "Very well. I understand your decision. Barkpaw, you look like you're in need of a good meal. We'll camp out here tonight, and then Tornface, you and your family can leave tomorrow."

Tornface nodded. "Thank you for understanding."

While cats began to get nests and search for food, Flamepaw briefly told Barkpaw of how she'd been told by StarClan to search for her leader. She began to explain the adventures they'd encountered, leaving out the deaths. Barkpaw nodded, very interested.

"Your clan, RiverClan, is it nice?" he wondered.

Flamepaw nodded. "It's a very big clan. We're known for fishing and swimming, unlike the other clans. I'm sure you'll love it."

Barkpaw nodded, though he seemed unsure. Soon, he began to chat with Flamepaw about his past, mainly talking about his sisters, Fernpaw and Snowpaw.

"Our mother left us in LightningClan as kits," he explained. "I've always looked after my sisters. I just can't believe they're gone."

"Hey," Flamepaw spoke quietly, touching his paw. "It's okay. I've seen a lot of cats join StarClan too recently."

Barkpaw nodded, sniffing quietly.

Flamepaw sighed, feeling bad for the tom. Still, she was glad to have a cat her age to talk to. After their depressing conversation, they spoke of training, and Flamepaw found the tom friendly and easy to talk to.

Before she went to sleep that night, she curled up in the nest next to Barkpaw and closed her eyes, hoping he'd bring some more joy to their journey.

Chapter 27

In her dreams, Flamepaw dreamt she was back at RiverClan. She entered with the others, proudly gleaming as she presented Goldstar to all the cats, assuring everyone that the leader was safe and it had been all her doing.

Then her parents were running up to her, embracing her warmly, telling her how proud they were of her and her accomplishments. Dusktail was right beside them, telling Flamepaw she surely deserved to become a warrior now due to her large success. Goldstar agreed, and Flamepaw was filled with happiness, knowing she'd done well.

These dreams of delight were suddenly replaced by those of horror. As the cats cheered for her, she wondered if this praise was really meant. Her mind was then filled with images of the horror she'd experienced—Daisyflower's limp body covered in blood, the vicious red eyes of Korosu, Clawkit's limp body lying across a rock...The list continued.

Flamepaw's eyes jolted open as she felt someone nudge her side. Her heart still racing from the nightmares, she noticed Goldstar standing over her, though she didn't show much concern for Flamepaw.

"Wake up," she whispered. "You and I are taking watch now."

Flamepaw nodded and stood up, her legs shaking. Barkpaw was curled up next to her, sleeping soundly. The others were quiet as well.

Flamepaw followed Goldstar towards the outer edge of the circle of sleeping cats and sat next to her, gazing at the gleaming moon and stars. For a moment, she could almost feel StarClan's presence. Then, it was quickly lost as the memories of horror flooded back into her head.

All seemed quiet tonight, and the forest slept soundly. Flamepaw wished it could always be this peaceful. She wished that a watch was not needed, and that they could assume Korosu would not attack. But this was not the case.

"I meant to ask what you were dreaming about," Goldstar

whispered, her eyes fixated on the round moon. "You were thrashing and whimpering."

"It was nothing," Flamepaw lied.

Goldstar nodded, still refusing to make eye contact. "It is okay to be frightened, you know. You need not act so bravely."

Flamepaw did not reply, but glanced up at the moon. She turned, watching as Goldstar sighed.

"A gathering will be going on tonight, and I will not attend. Do you believe RiverClan is in good hands currently?"

Flamepaw shrugged. "It all depends, I guess."

Goldstar nodded, casting her head down at her paws. "It was not wise for me to leave without advising the clan. I hope they can forgive me if we return."

Flamepaw gulped at the word "if," realizing Goldstar too had doubts of this journey.

"They will," Flamepaw assured her. "You were chosen as leader for a reason."

Goldstar smiled warmly. "Thank you, but it was Salmonstar's decision, not mine. Still, I trust his judgement."

"My mom also speaks highly of you," Flamepaw reassured her.

Goldstar's whiskers twitched in amusement. "That is kind, but we're family. She is expected to."

Flamepaw shrugged, laughing a little to herself. The sound of a twig cracking broke off their conversation, and Flamepaw was suddenly seized with terror.

Goldstar, also hearing this, froze.

"I'll go check it out," she murmured, slowly stalking forward. Flamepaw stayed behind, keeping a watch on the others. She didn't want Goldstar leaving, since she couldn't very well protect all these cats, but she followed Goldstar's advice.

The golden she-cat disappeared into some bushes, then giggled slightly. Flamepaw tilted her head in confusion, watching as the she-cat popped her head out of the bushes.

"Come here," she whispered.

Flamepaw nodded, slowly creeping forward. She was still unaware if Goldstar had truly found a threat, and she wanted to be cautious. She slowly unsheathed her claws and disappeared into the bushes.

She found Goldstar sitting on the other side, giggling to

herself. Confused, Flamepaw came forward and unsheathed her claws, finding Goldstar facing a puddle of water. In the center sat a lone frog that croaked.

"It was nothing but a frog?" Flamepaw wondered.

Goldstar nodded. "Better a frog than something else," she replied, touching the frog with her paw. It leapt into the air and continued on, causing more noise as it jumped into a pair of bushes.

Flamepaw smiled, glad it had been nothing.

At that moment, however, a large yowl came from some bushes nearby, and Flamepaw shrieked as Neko leapt out of the bushes, his fur wild, his claws unsheathed. He let out a snarl, Rosepettle following behind.

"Is someone attacking?" Rosepettle asked curiously.

Neko, looking confused, unsheathed his claws and glanced around.

"My, you looked quite threatening for a kittypet," Goldstar joked.

Neko's fur flattened, and he glanced down in embarrassment. "Sorry. I thought someone was intruding."

Rosepettle attempted to sooth him by running her tail down his pelt.

"You were very brave and wise checking to make sure. If there had been an intruder, you would've scared him so badly, he would've left the forest in an instant," she assured him.

Flamepaw agreed, smiling as Neko's self-esteem was boost.

"Being alert is a good quality for a warrior," Goldstar told him, causing Neko to grow even more excited.

Suddenly, Zebrafur burst into the bushes, her eyes dim with sleep.

"Is someone attacking?" she wondered.

"No. Just a big misunderstanding," Goldstar assured her. "Let's all head back to camp."

The cats nodded, and Flamepaw padded back with the others, stopping at the circle of cats. Neko and Rosepettle both found their nests and curled up beside each other while Zebrafur returned to her mate and kit.

Flamepaw glanced over at Barkpaw, who now shivered slightly with Flamepaw's pelt no longer brushing against him. She frowned, wanting to know more about the mysterious tom who had appeared.

"Get sleep," Goldstar advised Flamepaw.

"But I'm on duty," Flamepaw argued.

"If I need help, I'll wake you up," Goldstar told her. "But you need rest."

Flamepaw glanced at Barkpaw with uncertainty, then turned back to Goldstar.

"Thank you," she spoke at last and returned to her nest, curling back up beside the dark brown tom. Realizing how tired she was, she found herself drifting back into a dreamless sleep.

Sunlight streaming onto her eyes made Flamepaw awake the next morning. Zebrafur and Tornface had been the last on watch, and so they were already up, distributing small portions of prey to every cat.

Flamepaw rose and stretched her sore limbs, glad to see a beautiful day. Barkpaw's nest was empty, and she found him chatting eagerly with the others, talking greatly about his life in LightningClan and his wonderful sisters.

Realizing she was the last to awake, Flamepaw joined the others and was given some squirrel, which she happily ate.

"And no troubles last night?" Goldstar asked.

Tornface shook his head. "All was quiet."

"I helped watch too!" Tigerkit squeaked.

His mother rolled her eyes. "Before you decided to go back to sleep."

"I'm a growing kit!" Tigerkit argued. "I need my sleep!"

All the cats laughed in amusement.

"Are you really leaving us?" Rosepettle asked sadly as their breakfast came to an end.

Zebrafur frowned. "I'm afraid so. Tigerkit is homesick, and Tornface and I have decided it best to journey back home."

Tornface nodded beside her. "We thank you for letting us travel with you though."

"Thank you," Goldstar purred. "We would never have made if it weren't for you and your darling kits."

Tornface smiled weakly while tears gathered in Zebrafur's eyes. Barkpaw stood, confused about the whole matter. Flamepaw supposed she'd have to explain to him the details in more depth later.

"Thank you very much," Zebrafur responded, and the cats

all huddled together, embracing the family.

"Good-bye!" Tigerkit squeaked as he began to depart from the group of cats with his parents. Tornface smiled and lifted the tom onto his back, and for awhile, the cats stood, listening to Tigerkit's shrieks of laughter and Zebrafur's chatter until they disappeared into the forest.

Then, Goldstar turned to the others, and with a look of all seriousness, she said, "Let's journey home ourselves."

Chapter 28

Flamepaw could feel herself growing closer to RiverClan with each step she took. For the past few days, the group of cats had been traveling through the woods, slowly retracing their steps. Unfortunately, with her retracting steps came terrible memories that Flamepaw did not want to reflect on.

At night she was haunted by the dead, bloody bodies of the cats around her that had died. She wanted to believe their deaths had been for a good cause, but Korosu was still on the prowl, and the deaths had been mostly meaningless.

Flamepaw tried to hide these nightmares as best she could, but Goldstar often eyed her, and even Barkpaw had asked if she normally tossed in her sleep.

But Flamepaw wasn't the only one still recovering from the horrid memories. She was able to defect fear in Neko's eyes, as well as Rosepettle. Goldstar sometimes spoke out in her sleep, and though she acted brave, Snowheart at times seemed out of it as well.

The fact was they were all exhausted after a long and almost unnecessary journey. While Flamepaw wanted to feel like she'd completed her quest, she wasn't too sure. With Korosu still alive, Goldstar and RiverClan remained in constant danger. Perhaps only half of it had been completed.

Waking up in the morning, Flamepaw realized she was near the spot where Goldstar had been captured by foxes...where Daisyflower had died. She could tell by the disgusting stale fox scent and the still faint smell of blood.

Rising to her feet, Flamepaw felt almost queasy after taking a scent. Barkpaw stirred beside her and glanced at her in curiosity.

"Everything okay?" he wondered.

Flamepaw nodded. "Just a familiar spot," she noted.

Barkpaw did not question her only further but pushed a freshly killed mouse toward her that Snowheart had so generously caught on her morning hunt with Runningkit.

"Thanks," Flamepaw replied, grateful for the tom's kindness. She still wasn't that hungry though and only nibbled slightly on the mouse. She offered the rest to Barkpaw and left him to speak to Goldstar, who anxiously paced around the forest floor.

"Goldstar," Flamepaw called, causing the golden tabby to stop in her tracks. She turned, her eyes fixing onto Flamepaw's. They were red and bloodshot from anxiety, and Flamepaw even noticed her pelt didn't seem to glow as brightly.

"Sorry, Flamepaw. Can I help you?" she wondered.

"I-I was just wondering how much longer it'd be until we got home," Flamepaw spoke quietly, images of her parents flooding through her mind. She felt she'd been gone far too long.

Goldstar was silent for a moment, glancing at the blue sky. "Perhaps another two sunrises. We know where we're going now, so it shouldn't be long."

"Thank you," Flamepaw replied, dipping her head and leaving the she-cat to return to her pacing. She found Barkpaw finishing the rest of his breakfast. He glanced up as he saw her and smiled warmly.

"Goldstar says we'll arrive to RiverClan in two days," Flamepaw told him excitedly.

Barkpaw grinned. "I can't wait! You've all spoken so much of it. It seems great."

Flamepaw nodded, but guilt filled her. Was it really all that great now that RiverClan was under the threat of Korosu?

"You're giving that look again," Barkpaw observed.

"What look?" Flamepaw wondered.

"That look where you doubt what you're saying or you're lying about your true feelings," Barkpaw stated openly.

Flamepaw only stood, shocked. Was it that obvious?

Barkpaw chuckled slightly. "I don't think anyone else has noticed. But you do it a lot. Is everything okay?"

Flamepaw sighed, knowing she could not lie to the tom. Since he'd joined the journey, they'd grown in friendship, and she now thought of him as a constant companion. She felt she could trust him wholeheartedly. After all, he'd told her much about his personal past in LightningClan. Why couldn't she do the same?"

Flamepaw sighed and sat down next to the tom. "I know I haven't been gone moons and moons, but everything feels just so different now. I've witnessed the deaths of several cats close to me, I've been exposed to danger, and I'm now fully aware of a powerful threat against RiverClan. I just don't feel like the same cat. In fact, I'm almost frightened to go home."

Barkpaw nodded, then spoke. "I understand you. I-I'm fairly sure my sisters are dead after the dogs attacked, and the clan is surely deceased as well. I guess we're on the same page."

"But how will my parents react? My mentor? My friend?" Flamepaw wondered. "I don't think I could go back and be the same apprentice."

"But you won't," Barkpaw pointed out. "But remember, something positive will come out of it. You've experienced battle, which may improve your fighting skills. You've also learned to hunt. Plus, now you won't be living under a rock about RiverClan business."

"Thanks, Barkpaw," Flamepaw replied, smiling. "I really think you'll like RiverClan though. We're so thrilled to have you join us. I hope you know how to fish."

"I'll learn," he said, grinning.

"All right, let's move out!" Goldstar called, breaking off their conversation.

Flamepaw sighed and stood up, Barkpaw doing the same. Together, the cats gathered in their familiar formation. Goldstar led the way, her nose and eyesight the sharpest out of everyone.

Neko and Rosepettle paired together and traveled behind Goldstar. Next, Flamepaw joined the group alongside Barkpaw. And to top it off, Snowheart and Runningkit padded together at the end of the group.

The sun was shining brightly, and Flamepaw began to pant as the sun warmed her thick pelt. It was yet another extremely hot green-leaf day, and Flamepaw looked forward to the cold river.

Barkpaw too seemed to suffer from the heat, and eventually, the cats were forced to stop at a nearby stream for a drink of water. Flamepaw crept down at the stream's edge, licking up the cold water joyfully. It was nothing compared to the rushing river, but for the time being, it would do.

Rosepettle and Neko were stretched out in the shade underneath a tree, trying to keep as cool as possible. Flamepaw allowed the water from the stream to coat her face, and she gently flicked water off her.

Grinning, she moved her way into the stream, quickly gathering the attention of the others.
"What in StarClan's name are you doing, Flamepaw?" Barkpaw wondered in surprise.

Flamepaw grinned, soothed by the cold water against her pelt. The others only glanced at her, intrigued by her idea. She began to move her legs beneath her and swim in the shallow stream.

"Come on!" she called to the others. "The water's fine!"

"Why would you swim?!" Barkpaw exclaimed.

"We're RiverClan cats," Goldstar purred as she moved past the tom. "We're all natural-born swimmers."

And with that, she and the others moved past Barkpaw and leapt into the stream happily, splashing each other and enjoying the cool water. Neko, Runningkit, and Barkpaw seemed skeptical, but soon Runningkit had dipped his paw in the water, and the others soon followed behind.

Flamepaw swam toward Barkpaw, who stood near the edge of the stream, his paws soaking in the water.

"Come on. Swim a little," Flamepaw teased, trying to motion him forward.

"I don't know how," Barkpaw admitted.

Flamepaw rolled her eyes. "The stream is extremely shallow. Come on. Just come out a little farther."

"Promise you won't drown me?" Barkpaw asked.

Flamepaw laughed. "I promise."

At this reply, Barkpaw slowly edged farther into the water, slowly at first, and then fully dipping his body into the water. He clenched his teeth at first, then relaxed as the cold water soothed him.

As soon as he was settled, Flamepaw threw up her paw to splash water into his face.

"Hey!" Barkpaw called, splashing her back.

Flamepaw giggled, throwing her paw against the water again. This time, Neko was sprayed, and he turned in shock, splashing Flamepaw. Laughing, soon the entire group of cats were splashing each other and giggling.

This continued for quite some time until the others became cold and exhausted. Tired, they exited the stream, all of them soaking wet. Despite their wish to just rest, Goldstar made it clear they needed to continue on their way, and soon, they were back in formation, the sun drying up their pelts as they came closer and closer to RiverClan.

Except now, Flamepaw was somewhat excited to return home. She smiled at Barkpaw beside her and envisioned her nest in the apprentice den now, calling to her. Soon, she would be home.

Chapter 29

Flamepaw's eyes slowly opened to find another sunny day. It had been nearly seven sunrises since they'd begun their journey home, and Flamepaw knew they'd be arriving back at RiverClan any day. In fact, if all went well today, they'd reach Mothermouth by the afternoon.

Flamepaw was excited by this idea, but also frightened. She still wasn't sure how it would feel to return home after being gone so long. Plus, she'd have to make up missed training, suffer consequences from her parents from sneaking away, and so forth...She guessed she hadn't thought about that until now.

But Barkpaw seemed to keep her spirits up, and she would be excited to begin training with him upon their arrival back in RiverClan. She'd also be glad to have Neko and Runningkit join the clan as official warriors. Korosu may still have been a threat, but Flamepaw saw a lot of good coming for RiverClan with the addition of clan members.

Flamepaw didn't want to rise, but the hot sun caused her to stir. She stood up and padded to the small stream they'd camped beside. A slow and small trickle of water was flowing, nearly dried up from the hot green-leaf season, but she managed to get a pleasant drink before settling herself back down beside the others.

Noticing Goldstar's absence, Flamepaw was about to panic and wake the others when the golden she-cat came into camp with a fairly large rabbit in her jaws, as well as a fresh robin. She set her prey down, and before doing anything else, she let out a yowl.

"RIVERCLAN WARRIORS, RISE!" she shouted.

The other cats begin to stir and groan, not wanting to use their sore muscles again on a long journey. But Goldstar was adamant, repeatedly shouting and poking the sleeping warriors. Soon, they were all risen, barely awake.

"I'm glad Flamepaw was awake," Goldstar noted. "She seems to know when a RiverClan warrior rises."

Flamepaw blushed, glad to be praised by Goldstar. She'd really grown toward the golden she-cat on the quest. It was no wonder her mother always spoke so highly of her.

" 'A RiverClan warrior knows when to rise'," Barkpaw mocked Goldstar as he took a bite from the robin that had been split between Flamepaw, Barkpaw, Neko, and Rosepettle. It was a small amount of food, but Flamepaw knew they didn't have time to fill their bellies. Besides, there would be a nice pile of fresh-kill back at home.

Flamepaw giggled at Barkpaw's comment, then shushed him.

"Sh, maybe she'll kick you out of the clan," Flamepaw whispered.

"She hasn't even accepted me into the clan," Barkpaw pointed out, taking another bite.

"Hey, save some for us!" Neko snapped.

Rosepettle rolled her eyes. "Still not used to that half-empty feeling your stomach?"

Neko turned red. "Hey, I'm not a chubby kittypet anymore!" he argued. "I'm a warrior!" he exclaimed, puffing out his chest.

"Who couldn't wake up in time," Barkpaw muttered, causing him and Flamepaw to snicker in laughter. Even Rosepettle joined in, and Neko blushed, embarrassed, deciding not to speak about his apparent warriorhood any longer.

"Are we ready to head out?" Goldstar asked.

The other cats seemed content, and so, they began their journey through the woods. Flamepaw of course trotted beside Barkpaw, admiring the crisp green colors of the trees. Birds chirped nearby, and she could detect the low buzz of cicadas. If only green-leaf wasn't so hot...

Thankfully today, their path brought them under the shade of the trees, and the temperature had dropped over the past few days. Flamepaw knew it was still a little while until leaf-fall, but she also knew that green-leaf tended to consist of extremely hot and warm days. Perhaps there would even be a little rain soon.

"Please tell me it's not too hot in RiverClan," Barkpaw moaned, apparently suffering from the heat.

"You're forgetting there's a nice river for us to swim in," Flamepaw pointed out.

Beside her, Rosepettle purred. "I can't wait to dip my paws into that river again!" she exclaimed.

"The river tends to dry some in green-leaf," Goldstar reminded them.

Flamepaw sighed, knowing she was right. She supposed that when she returned, the river would not be as full as when she had first begun fishing with Dusktail. Would that affect her training? She hoped not.

My training will be affected anyway, she thought, seeing as how she'd been gone over a moon, nearly two, she guessed.

"Keep up!" Goldstar snapped, seeing the others falling behind.

Flamepaw obeyed her orders, quickening her pace. Barkpaw hesitated but did the same, keeping up with his new leader. Snowheart trotted alongside Goldstar, chatting eagerly about wanting to see RiverClan again. Flamepaw watched as Runningkit listened intently, and she supposed this would be his first time experiencing RiverClan again too. After all, he'd been kitnapped at a fairly young age. He probably didn't remember the clan at all.

Not able to resist herself, Flamepaw spoke up to Goldstar. "How will Mountainheart react to your return?"

Goldstar shrugged. "He's a good deputy, and though he'll be angry, I don't think of him as a power-hungry tyrant. Mothwing does not know of our survival, but I'm sure he'll be thrilled to end his temporary leadership."

"Survival? Mothwing?" Barkpaw wondered.

"Uh, well, we kind of leapt off a cliff last time we saw Mothwing, our medicine cat. She returned to RiverClan."

"Serves her right. You seriously jumped off a cliff?" Barkpaw wondered.

Flamepaw nodded. "By some miracle of StarClan, we survived. I hope Mothwing doesn't think we're all dead though..."

"Are you good friends with her?" Barkpaw asked.

Flamepaw nodded. She noticed he seemed to be wincing a little as she mentioned to him all their memories of friendship as kits and apprentices.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

Barkpaw sighed. "My sister, Snowpaw, was medicine cat apprentice. I guess when you talk about how she wanted to become medicine cat, I just think of her...Sorry, I need to let go of LightningClan. It's just hard."

"Hey, you don't know she's dead for sure. LightningClan may have ended, but you can still hold onto it."

"She's dead. I know she is. And Fernpaw too," Barkpaw

argued.

Flamepaw didn't want to argue with him any more on the subject, so she remained silent, continuing to walk.

For awhile, the group of cats trotted through the woods throughout the course of the day, stopping only for a drink of water or a bite to eat if their stomachs were growling so loudly that the others were getting annoyed.

By mid-day, they were already marching uphill toward the tall mountainous hills that held Moonstone. Flamepaw was beginning to get excited, knowing she'd be able to see the entire forest from the cave. She'd be home tomorrow morning, maybe even tonight!

The others were beginning to pant from exhaustion, their already sore muscles burning with each step. Flamepaw's muscles burned as well, but she kept on moving, knowing she'd be closer to her parents, her mentor, her training, her new life in RiverClan! All anxieties were not replaced by eagerness, and she even surpassed Goldstar in trotting up the hill.

"Don't stray too far!" Goldstar called as Flamepaw began to leave her behind. "You don't know where you're going!"

"I'll stay in sight!" Flamepaw promised, continuing to pad up the hill. They were coming closer to Mothermouth now. Flamepaw could see the blue light of Moonstone glowing from it in the distance. It would take them an hour or so at most to reach it.

The sun was already going down, and Flamepaw sighed, guessing they'd probably camp out at Mothermouth cave for the night to rest up.

She continued going, turning to see the others. They were still behind her, but she could no longer hear her conversation. Flamepaw continued, trees beginning to conceal her from the others. Realizing she should probably stop, she took a break and rested, waiting for the others to catch up.

Meanwhile, she heard the crack of twigs and footsteps. Frozen in her tracks, Flamepaw glanced around, trying to make out whatever was lingering through the woods.

"Goldstar?" she asked, standing up and looking around.

She turned, still seeing the cats trotting up the hill. The footsteps came to a cease, and Flamepaw held her breath. Who was here?

As soon as Goldstar touched the top of the hill alongside

Flamepaw, bushes rattled. Flamepaw tensed, noticing how Goldstar didn't even seem to notice anything wrong. Suddenly, Mothwing burst out of the bushes, a small brown she-cat by her side.

"Goldstar!" Mothwing gasped.

The she-cat's eyes were bloodshot, as if she'd been sleep-deprived. She looked anxious, worried, fearful. Flamepaw knew immediately that something wasn't right.

"Mothwing," Flamepaw began, but Mothwing shoved past her.

"Something's happened," she gasped, out of breath.

The others all gazed at Mothwing with suspicion, awaiting to hear the dreadful news that Mothwing had yet to bestow upon them.

Chapter 30

Flamepaw stood, frozen in fear, waiting for her tortoiseshell friend to speak. Sighing, Mothwing sat down, and the small kit beside her did the same, looking up at Mothwing anxiously.

"Is RiverClan okay?" Goldstar asked, concerned.

Mothwing nodded.

"Everything was fine when I returned," she explained. "Mountainheart was anxious, of course, but he'd been running the clan well. When I relayed the message that all of you had jumped off a cliff, Mountainheart was sure you'd all been killed. He wouldn't, however, go to Moonstone to become leader, even though the clan had advised him too. He still had hope you were all alive and would return. It'll bring him joy when I relay the news."

"What about my parents?" Flamepaw blurted out.

"They were worried too," Mothwing explained. "Your mother, Suntail, burst into tears as soon as I told them. They'd been worried ever since you had left with Rosepettle. They'll be happy to see you, Flamepaw, I'm sure."

"But what's happened that's concerning you?" Goldstar repeated.

Mothwing sighed. "We've been kitnapped, Goldstar."

Flamepaw stiffened, immediately knowing who was responsible for this event.

"What are the names of the cats?" Snowheart demanded, slashing her white tail angrily against the ground. Falling victim to the act herself, Flamepaw suspected she was angry.

"It happened this morning," Mothwing began. "There were two cats. I know one was named Jayscreech, but there was also a white she-cat."

"Korosu," Rosepettle growled.

Mothwing nodded. "That was it."

"Mothwing, what's going on?" the small kitten mewed beside her.

"Korosu is an evil cat who steals kits and uses them for her advantage, Spotkit," Mothwing warned. She glanced up, then spoke. "I suppose I forgot to make introductions. Mountaineye

unfortunately passed away while you were gone. Spotkit will become the new medicine cat apprentice as soon as she reaches six moons."

Spotkit nodded, joyful for a moment. She then returned to her somber mood and looked to Mothwing to explain more.

"How many did she take?" Goldstar asked.

"Five," Mothwing replied. "Mountainheart sent out patrols to search for Korosu. I offered to look as well in case any of them managed to escape. I made Spotkit come with me and bring herbs in case any cats were injured. I'm thankful to have found you."

Flamepaw nodded. "It's a good thing you did. Have you found any kits or Korosu at least?"

Mothwing shook her head. "I had thought that I had found her until I realized it was only you, Flamepaw. You're lucky Spotkit stopped me from leaping out onto you. I would've ripped you to shreds before I recognized you."

Flamepaw gulped. "That's...comforting."

"How is the clan dealing?" Goldstar questioned further.

"Not well," Mothwing sighed. "Like I said, Mountainheart's been doing well, but the clan isn't the same without you, Goldstar."

"Then it's a good thing we're returning," Goldstar said. "Should we head back?"

Mothwing sighed, glancing over at Spotkit. "I suppose. We haven't had any luck all day. Let's head back to RiverClan."

Flamepaw's heart leapt at the idea of returning home. She supposed that the clan would not be in good spirits with the kitnapping, but upon seeing their leader and several warriors return, including new clan members, she was sure their moods would be lightened.

Beginning to walk with the others, Flamepaw felt Barkpaw brush against her.

"This is just how it happened with LightningClan," he muttered.

Flamepaw sighed. "No, RiverClan is strong. I-I don't know how big your clan was or how great it was, but RiverClan will survive. Things will be better when we get back. You'll train with me, Barkpaw, and we'll become warriors!"

"It might be a little sooner if RiverClan keeps getting threats," Barkpaw spoke.

Flamepaw was becoming irritated with his pessimism.

"Well, I'll see my parents," she snapped. "And my mentor. The clan will be fine, you'll see."

"All right," Barkpaw replied, sounding uncertain.

Furious, Flamepaw pushed past him, catching up to Mothwing and Spotkit.

"I'm sorry about Mountaineye," Flamepaw said to Mothwing.

Mothwing sighed. "Don't be," she replied, smiling some. "He was old anyway."

"How did he die?" Flamepaw wondered.

"Old age," Mothwing responded. "Completely natural. Died in his sleep."

"That's good," Flamepaw replied quietly. She then turned to Spotkit. "Are you excited to be a medicine cat apprentice?"

Spotkit nodded her head vigorously, her eyes wide with either excitement or fear from the darkness of the forest.

"How old is she?" Flamepaw asked.

"Almost five moons. It won't be long," Mothwing explained.

Flamepaw nodded, halting as she heard a rustle of bushes.

"Is everything okay?" Mothwing asked, stopping beside her. The others soon stopped, and Flamepaw spoke.

"I-I thought I heard something," she admitted, continuing to walk. She continued walking in embarrassment, not meaning to stop the entire party of cats.

However, the noise returned, and Flamepaw's heartbeat began to quicken as she imagined Korosu lurking beside them, waiting to snatch up Spotkit and kill the others. Flamepaw quickened her pace, shrieking as two figures sprawled out of the bushes.

"It's Korosu!" she shrieked without even making the cats out.

The other cats unsheathed their claws, and Mothwing stood in front of Spotkit protectively, growling at the cats. Suddenly, Mothwing's growls ceased, and she relaxed her muscles.

"They're kits!" she gasped.

A tortoiseshell tom stood up while the other kit, a gray tabby she-cat, remained groaning on the forest floor.

"Ella needs help!" the tom gasped. "She's been greatly injured!"

Mothwing rushed to the tiny she-cat, inspecting her wounds. She pressed her ear against the she-cat's chest.

"She's still alive," Mothwing breathed in relief. "Well, we'll give her help then."

"Is she okay?" Flamepaw asked, approaching Mothwing.

As Mothwing looked up, Flamepaw noticed blood smeared on Mothwing's ear where she had listened to the she-cat's heartbeat.

"She's alive, but just barely," Mothwing spoke more quietly. "Spotkit," she said, turning to her future apprentice. "Get those cobwebs."

Spotkit nodded, rustling through the collection of herbs she and Mothwing had been carrying. Mothwing then turned to the tortoiseshell tom.

"You should not have dragged her so roughly," she snapped.

"I'm sorry...We were being chased," the tom explained. He too looked exhausted.

"Did you escape from Korosu?" Goldstar asked.

"Who?" the tom wondered. "We escaped from a white she-cat and were trying to come back to RiverClan. Ella was attacked in the process. Even I got a few scratches," he spoke, revealing a bloody wound down his side.

Flamepaw watched both Goldstar and Mothwing's expressions turn grim.

"You're Volekit, aren't you?" Mothwing asked. "You were also taken by Korosu?"

Volekit nodded, then out of exhaustion, collapsed.

"We can't keep moving," Mothwing decided. "We'll rest here for the night while I tend to the kits. If we leave by dawn, I should be able to get them back before..." Her voice trailed off. "I wish I were back in my den."

"Will they be okay?" Flamepaw asked, concerned.

Mothwing placed the unconscious Volekit next to the groaning Ella. Spotkit was tending their wounds and fetching herbs for Mothwing. Mothwing, slowly applying them, turned to Flamepaw, sighing.

"I believe so, but it will be a long night," Mothwing explained. "Get some sleep, Flamepaw. Spotkit and I will be able to handle it."

Flamepaw did not want to leave her friend to care for dying kits all night, but she agreed and curled up next to a tree, tossing and turning as she listened to the painful cries of the kits who had miraculously managed to escape from Korosu.

All Flamepaw wished was to be home in RiverClan so all of this could go away.

Epilogue

Flamepaw felt nothing more than pure joy the moment her paw touched down on RiverClan camp soil. After a long and restless night, Volekit and Ella had managed to survive, just barely. As soon as the sun had risen, the cats had set out in a hurry, hoping to get the two injured kits help.

There was nothing but surprise plastered on the faces of the RiverClan cats as they became reunited with their missing clanmates. They surely had not expected Mothwing to return with the missing kits and missing cats.

Mountainheart had seemed not so much upset but relieved to be free from his leadership duties, and he gratefully handed them over to Goldstar as soon as he saw her.

As Mothwing brought the injured kits to the nursery, others began to become acquainted with the new clan members, which would in a short time be officially hailed as RiverClan members.

Leaving Barkpaw to chat with his new clanmates, Flamepaw quickly found her parents and ran to them, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her mother, Suntail, embraced her, her eyes wet too. Brownpelt, his eyes watery as well, stood beside the mother and daughter.

"I miss you guys so much," Flamepaw wailed, burying her head into her mother's thick ginger pelt. She hadn't realized how much she'd grown while she'd been gone, and she noticed that she was becoming even closer in size to her mother.

"Don't you ever run off again!" Brownpelt warned, slashing his tail.

Suntail glanced at him angrily, and Brownpelt sighed. "What we mean to say is, we love you, Flamepaw. Please stay safe."

Flamepaw nodded vigorously, nuzzling her father. Moments later, she was greeted by Dusktail, her old mentor, who congratulated her on her return to RiverClan safe and sound.

"I hope you'll be ready for training in the morning," he told her, winking.

"Just wait. I learned a lot while I was gone," Flamepaw teased.

Dusktail chuckled slightly and walked off, just as Goldstar took her position on the log.

"CATS OF RIVERCLAN!" she yowled.

Immediately, the cats gathered and fell silent, glad to have their leader reinstated. Flamepaw gathered beside them and smiled at Goldstar, glad to see the leader working to her best potential again.

Goldstar began by explaining her original reason for leaving, coupled with the multiple kidnappings and attacks by the notorious Korosu. For awhile, the cats remained silent as Goldstar went through the entire story. Flamepaw closed her eyes, the painful memories coming back to her clearly.

"Recently, RiverClan kits were taken," Goldstar announced. "This was no doubt the work of Korosu. Fortunately, two of the kits managed to escape, despite their grave injuries. It has come to my attention that Korosu is planning something, for what other reason would she need to steal kits for. We do not know for the time being what exactly she is meaning to accomplish, but I personally will be keeping a watchful eye on events taking place. While we have returned safely, Korosu is still on the prowl..."

This grave message chilled Flamepaw, and she quickly was reminded of the slim white she-cat who had caused her and her friends so much pain.

Goldstar quickly moved away from this message though and invited up Runningkit, Neko, and Barkpaw. Feeling slightly better, Flamepaw watched in excitement as the three officially became members of RiverClan, Barkpaw being given Rosepettle as a mentor, Neko's name changing to Spotteddusk, and Runningkit being officially named Runningblaze.

Together, the RiverClan cats cheered for their new members, and as soon as the crowd dispersed, Flamepaw found Barkpaw and congratulated him, excited to train with him. While this feeling of joy surged throughout the camp, a feeling of dread crept up in Flamepaw. She may have returned safely, but Korosu was still out there, waiting to attack.

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading the first installment in the Flamepaw series. Your comments, likes, and support has been wonderful, and I hope you enjoyed reading the book as much as I enjoyed writing it. Your support and encouragement in everything I do, including writing this novel, means a lot.

Be sure to check out the sequel, *Flamepaw's Destination.*

~Maeve